Asari Endou
Illustration by
Marui-no
17
Magical Girl
Raising Project
episodes Σ

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episodes Σ

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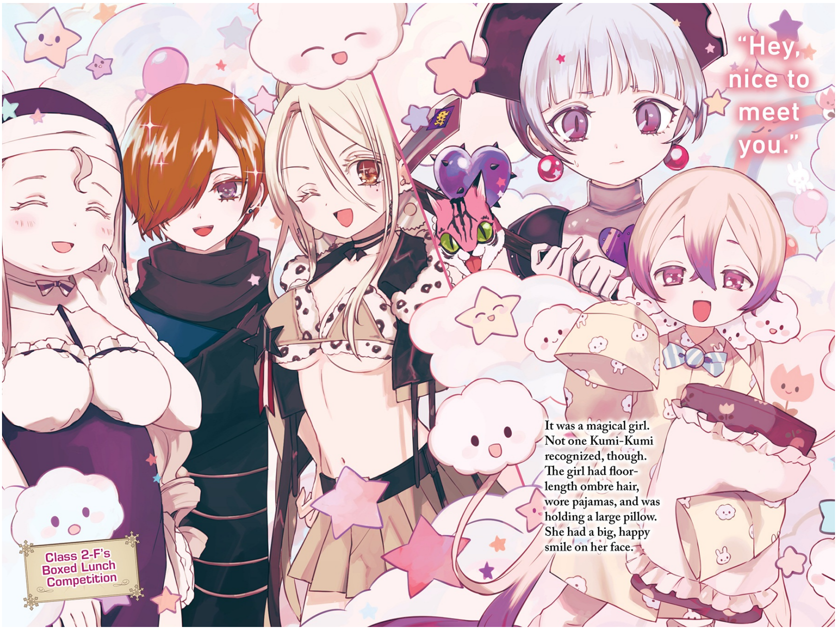
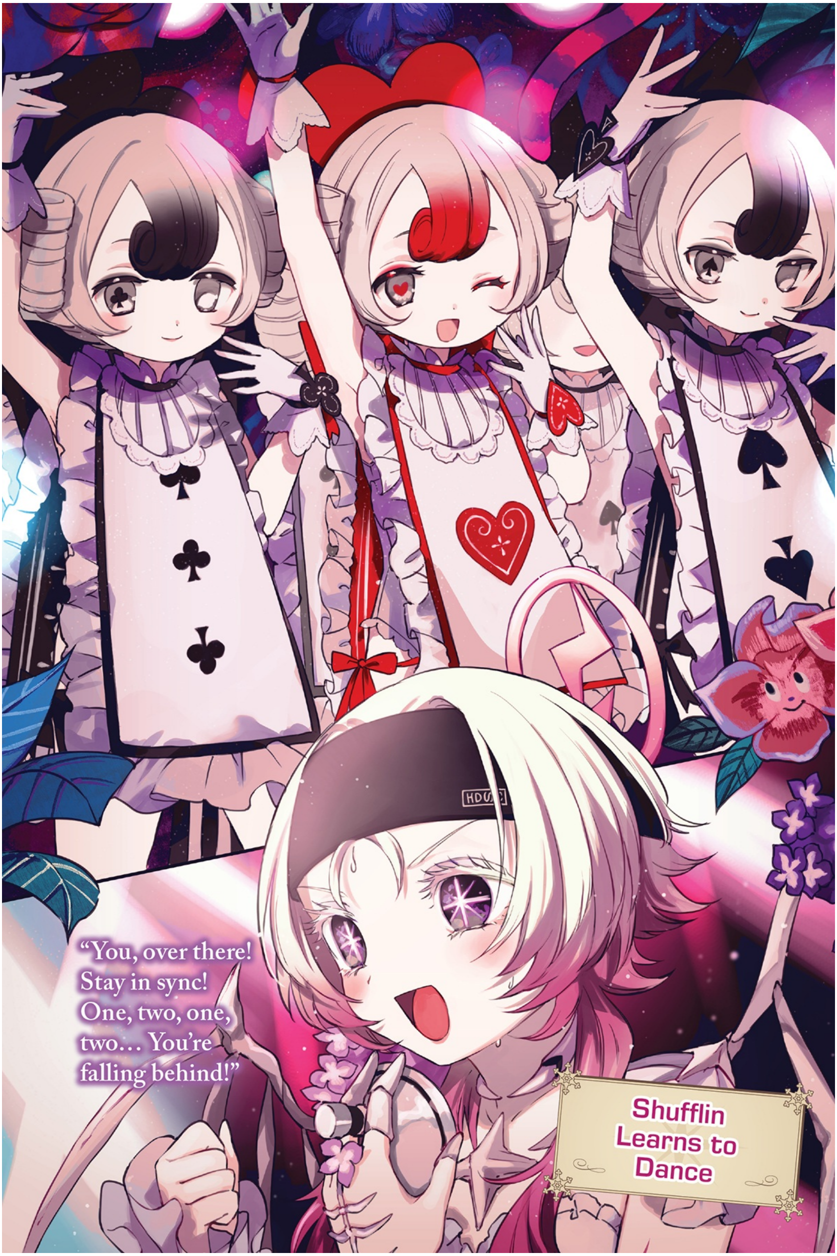
Marui-no



"Hey, nice to meet you."
Class 2-F's Boxed Lunch Competition

It was a magical girl. Not one Kumi-Kumi recognized, though. The girl had floor-length ombre hair, wore pajamas, and was holding a large pillow. She had a big, happy smile on her face.



"You, over there! Stay in sync! One, two, one, two… You're falling behind!"

Shufflin Learns to Dance

Magical Girl Raising Project

episodes Σ

17

Asari Endou

Illustration by Marui-no

YEN ON
New York

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Magical Girl Raising Project, Vol. 17
Asari Endou

Translation by Jennifer Ward
Cover art by Marui-no

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Magical Girl Raising Project

Magical Girl Raising Project

1

The super-popular mobile game *Magical Girl Raising Project* can cause miracles: It turns one out of every few tens of thousands of players into a real magical girl. Having been bestowed with magical powers, these girls get to live each day to the fullest.

But then one day, management sends them its unilateral decree: “We have too many magical girls, so we’re cutting the number in half.” And thus begins a harsh and ruthless race for survival among sixteen magical girls…

Magical Girl Raising Project restart

2

Having been bestowed with powers by the Magical Kingdom, these magical girls work hard every day at helping people. But then the girls receive invitations from an unknown sender to a game called *Magical Girl Raising Project*. Trapped in an unfair game where they could die at any time, each of the sixteen magical girls comes up with a plan to survive, as the figure behind the curtain toys with them…

Magical Girl Raising Project limited

3

During what was supposed to be a typical after-school club meeting, a small fairy named Toko appears out of nowhere with incredible news: All seven attendees have what it takes to become full-fledged magical girls! In exchange for their newfound abilities, they promise to save Toko from the evil mages who are hunting her down—but these baddies have some special magical-girl powers of their own!

Magical Girl Raising Project JOKERS

4

Sakura Kagami is just an ordinary girl, and her magical-girl persona, Prism Cherry, is just as ordinary, too. After the same old tired routine of saving people with her boring magic in a peaceful town, Sakura learns something incredible: Her classmate, Nami Aoki, is a magical girl, too!

It doesn’t take long before Sakura and Nami’s fate takes a turn and the veneer of magical-girl-hood falls apart to reveal something incredibly sinister…

Magical Girl Raising Project ACES

5

Snow White, a.k.a. the Magical-Girl Hunter, is searching for her dear friend Ripple when she’s summoned by one of the Three Sages, the Magical Kingdom’s highest authority. The Sage asks Snow White to locate a certain magical girl, but it turns out this mission has much more at stake than just a missing person…

Story Arcs

Magical Girl Raising Project QUEENS

6

Puk Puck's plan to "save" the Magical Kingdom is moving steadily along. Right when the situation seems hopeless, Pfle makes a desperate move in order to put a stop to her incredibly risky plan and save Shadow Gale from her clutches. Magical girls from all walks of life join forces in an attempt to put a stop to Puk Puck's ceremony, but a certain someone stands in their way...

Magical Girl Raising Project Black

7

With only fifteen students in total, and all girls at that, Umemizaki Junior High's class 2-F is a bit peculiar. In fact, "peculiar" doesn't even cut it—this is a special class that the Magical Kingdom created to raise the next generation of legitimate magical girls! From the outside, these elite students represent a beacon of hope for the future. But behind closed doors, something terrible is brewing...

Magical Girl Raising Project White

8

Snow White has infiltrated a class of magical girls in order to stop a conspiracy to overthrow the Magical Kingdom, but an unforeseen plot sees one classmate after another falling victim to foul play. Meanwhile, Ripple comes out of hiding to take down Frederica with the support of the First Lapis Lazuline...

Magical Girl Raising Project breakdown

side story

An experiment gone wrong leads to the death of a famous mage, and the passing of this illustrious individual sends the Magical Kingdom into mourning. Then, a few months later, the deceased mage's relations receive letters from his proxy regarding the inheritance of his estate, inviting them to a tiny uninhabited island the mage had used as a getaway cottage/research lab. When Mana gets one of these letters, she's skeptical, but after careful consideration, she contacts two magical-girl friends to accompany her there...

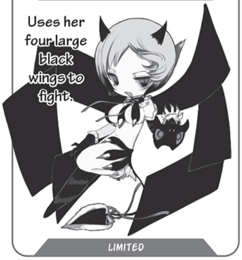
Magical Girl Raising Project F2P

original comic

Magical girls Spinon and Alma work for the Magical Kingdom's R&D and Magical Girl Resources Departments. When they hear rumors of a magical girl with the incredibly rare ability to "cancel out death," they head to F City to investigate and take her into custody. But once they arrive at their destination, they witness something they've never imagined: a giant magical barrier covering the whole city...

CHARACTERS

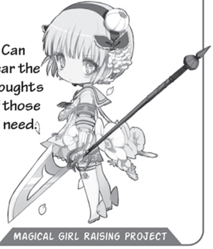
ARCHFIEND PAM



Uses her four large black wings to fight.

LIMITED

SNOW WHITE
KOYUKI HIMEKAWA

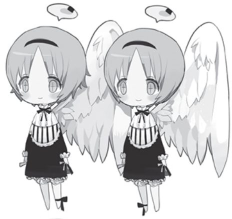


Can hear the thoughts of those in need.

MAGICAL GIRL RAISING PROJECT

YUNAEL
YUNA AMASATO

MINAEL
MINA AMASATO

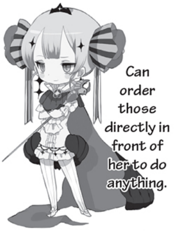


Can transform into any creature.

Can transform into any object.

MAGICAL GIRL RAISING PROJECT

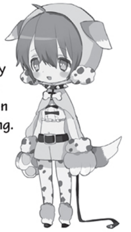
RULER
SANAE MOKUOU



Can order those directly in front of her to do anything.

MAGICAL GIRL RAISING PROJECT

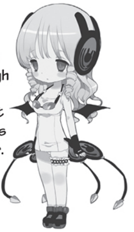
TAMA
TAMA INUBOUZAKI



Can quickly open holes in anything.

MAGICAL GIRL RAISING PROJECT

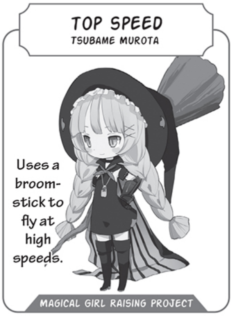
SWIM SWIM
AYANA SAKANAGI

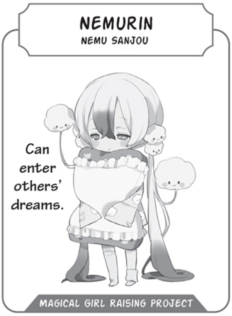


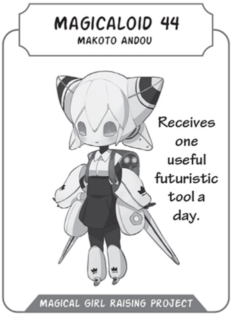
Can pass through any object like it's water.

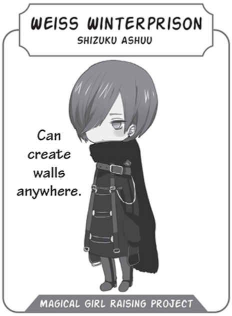
MAGICAL GIRL RAISING PROJECT

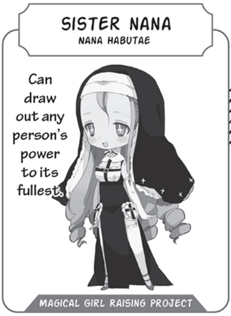
※ Character info includes magical-girl names, real names (where applicable), individual magic powers, and first appearance.

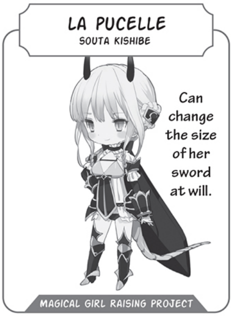

TOP SPEED
TSUBAME MUROTA
Uses a broomstick to fly at high speeds.
MAGICAL GIRL RAISING PROJECT

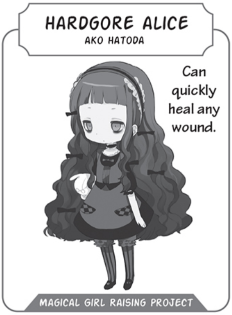

NEMURIN
NEMU SANJOU
Can enter others' dreams.
MAGICAL GIRL RAISING PROJECT

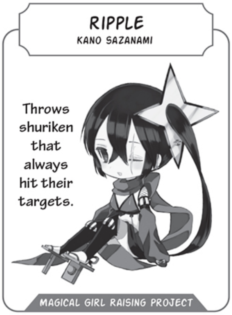

MAGICALOID 44
MAKOTO ANDOU
Receives one useful futuristic tool a day.
MAGICAL GIRL RAISING PROJECT


WEISS WINTERPRISON
SHIZUKU ASHUU
Can create walls anywhere.
MAGICAL GIRL RAISING PROJECT

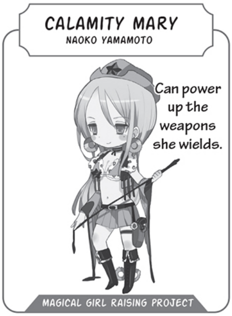

SISTER NANA
NANA HABUTAE
Can draw out any person's power to its fullest.
MAGICAL GIRL RAISING PROJECT

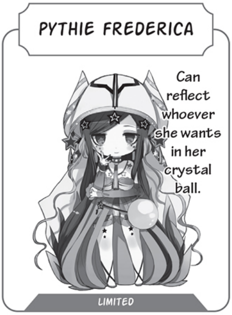

LA PUCELLE
SOUTA KISHIBE
Can change the size of her sword at will.
MAGICAL GIRL RAISING PROJECT

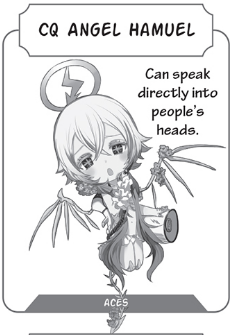

HARDGORE ALICE
AKO HATODA
Can quickly heal any wound.
MAGICAL GIRL RAISING PROJECT

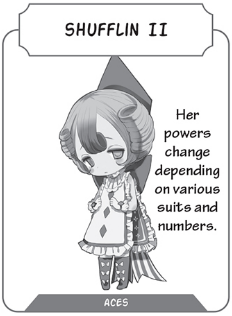

RIPPLE
KANO SAZANAMI
Throws shuriken that always hit their targets.
MAGICAL GIRL RAISING PROJECT

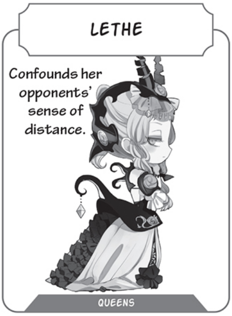
CHARACTERS

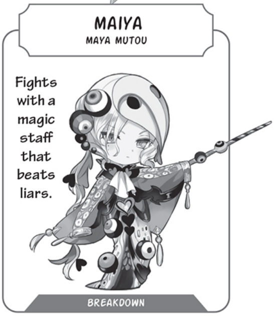

CALAMITY MARY
NAOKO YAMAMOTO
Can power up the weapons she wields.
MAGICAL GIRL RAISING PROJECT

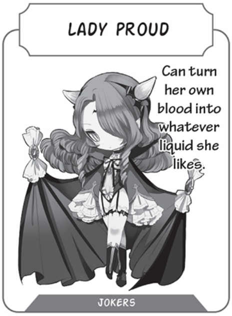

PYTHIE FREDERICA
Can reflect whoever she wants in her crystal ball.
LIMITED

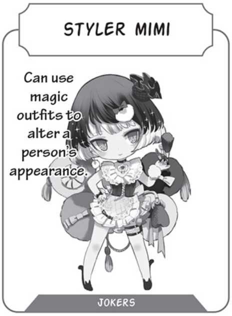

CQ ANGEL HAMUEL
Can speak directly into people's heads.
ACES


SHUFFLIN II
Her powers change depending on various suits and numbers.
ACES


LETHE
Confounds her opponents' sense of distance.
QUEENS

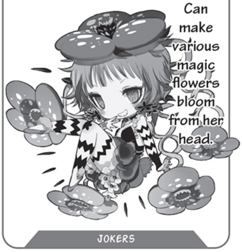

MAIYA
MAYA MUTOU
Fights with a magic staff that beats liars.
BREAKDOWN


LADY PROUD
Can turn her own blood into whatever liquid she likes.
JOKERS


STYLER MIMI
Can use magic outfits to alter a person's appearance.
JOKERS

※ Character info includes magical-girl names, real names (where applicable), individual magic powers, and first appearance.

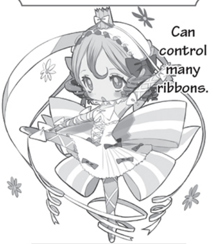
MARIKA FUKUROI
MARIKO FUKUROI



Can make various magic flowers bloom from her head.

JOKERS

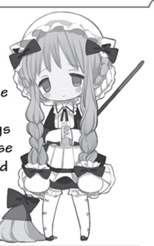
KURU-KURU HIME
NOZOMI HIMENO



Can control many ribbons.

LIMITED

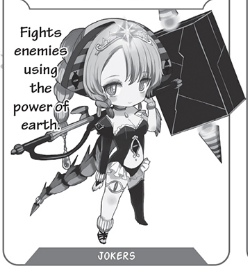
NOKKO
NORIKO NONOHARA



Can change the feelings of those around her.

RESTART

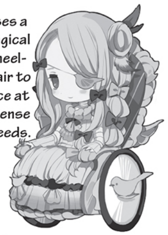
PRINCESS QUAKE
CHIKO SATOU



Fights enemies using the power of earth.

JOKERS

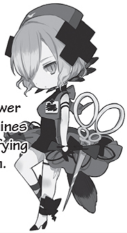
PFLE
KANOE HITOKOUJI



Uses a magical wheelchair to race at intense speeds.

RESTART

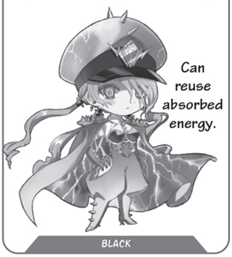
SHADOW GALE
MAMORI TOTOYAMA



Can power up machines by modifying them.

RESTART

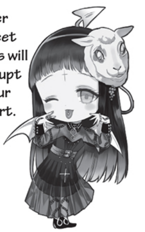
THUNDER-GENERAL ADELHEID
ADELHEID MÜLLER



Can reuse absorbed energy.

BLACK

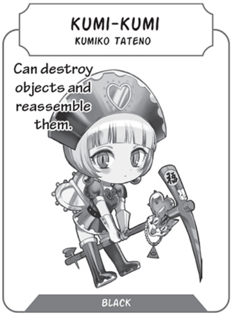
MEPHIS PHELES
FUUKO SAYAMA



Her sweet words will corrupt your heart.

BLACK

CHARACTERS



KUMI-KUMI
KUMIKO TATENO

Can destroy objects and reassemble them.

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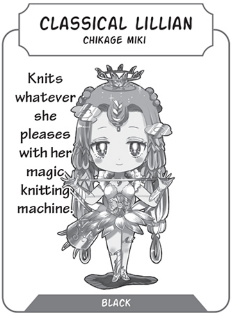

CLASSICAL LILLIAN
CHIKAGE MIKI

Knits whatever she pleases with her magic knitting machine.

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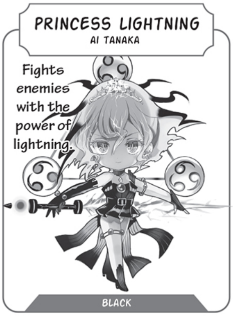

PRINCESS LIGHTNING
AI TANAKA

Fights enemies with the power of lightning.

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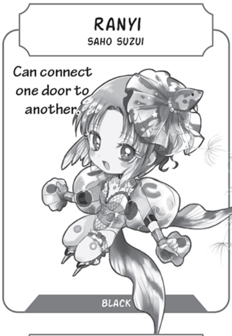

RANYI
SAHO SUZUI

Can connect one door to another.

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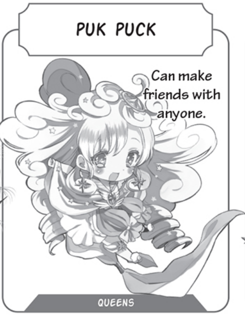
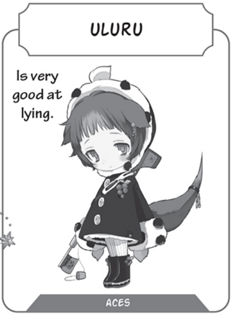


PUK PUCK

Can make friends with anyone.

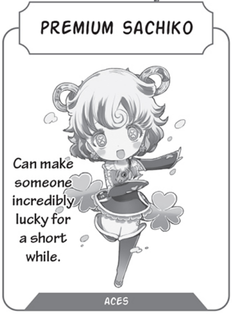
QUEENS



ULURU

Is very good at lying.

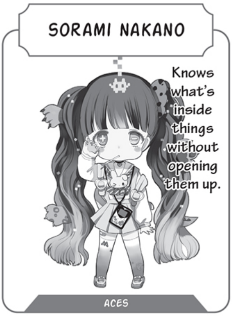
ACES



PREMIUM SACHIKO

Can make someone incredibly lucky for a short while.

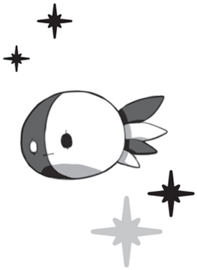
ACES



SORAMI NAKANO

Knows what's inside things without opening them up.

ACES



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THE ARCHFIEND CRAM SCHOOL'S CHRISTMAS PARTY FROM HELL

THE YOUNG PRINCESS NOZOMI HIMENO

THE SCHOOLYARD OBSERVER

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*Each chapter title page includes where these stories were first published.

Illustration by MARUI-NO
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The Way of the Archfiend

This story takes place shortly before the events of *Magical Girl Raising Project*.

Debut

Monthly Magical Girl Raising Project on
This Manga is Amazing! WEB

The Way of the Archfiend

The Way of the Archfiend by Archfiend Pam, the strongest magical girl in history, was sold in e-book format only. Many books written by magical girls had been published before, but they'd all been print copies. This was the first one available digitally.

Editorial Office Eight, the section of the PR Department in charge of books, had pleaded with and pestered the higher-ups—"we have bookselling know-how," "this should absolutely have a physical edition," "it could become an even bigger hit than *The Lady Puk Picture Book Series for Educating Good Children*"—but that didn't change the decision to sell *The Way of the Archfiend* exclusively as an e-book.

There were two reasons for this.

First, *The Way of the Archfiend* detailed various matters of the Magical Kingdom. Unlike educational picture books or magicalgirl anime fan books, this couldn't be passed off as fiction. It needed a magic lock cast on it to keep outsiders from getting their hands on it, something that was easier to do with an e-book.

Second, an e-book was a convenient opportunity for the higher-ups to churn out some accomplishments for the newly created IT Department. And since this opinion came from the very higher-ups who had backed the establishment of the IT Department in the first place, the higher-ups basically profited from solving a problem they had generated themselves.

That was how the strongest magical girl's debut work was transferred from the PR Department to the IT Department.

The book's subject matter was wide-ranging, from the Archfiend Cram School's origins and history to the mentality needed to become stronger, as well as recommended training methods, Pam's tenure with the Department of Diplomacy, and so on and so forth. Though some criticized the book for being too broad and unfocused, it was generally well-received. Many people bought a copy: Archfiend Cram School students and graduates, Department of Diplomacy members, magical girls who didn't attend the Cram School but wanted to get stronger, mages who liked new things, and mascot characters who loved magical girls. It was fair to call the book a smash hit if you took the market parameters into consideration. Everyone involved breathed sighs of relief.

The publishers weren't the only ones who were relieved. Students and graduates alike of the Cram School were so fixated on the sales of the book that many alumni bought multiple copies out of concern that their beloved Archfiend Pam's prestige would be damaged if her book was a flop.

Fortunately the book did sell, so no one was heartbroken, but a big problem emerged later on: Archfiend Pam herself didn't have a copy of *The Way of the Archfiend*.

◇ Special Strategy Headquarters

The technologically incompetent author never picked up the e-book, so she didn't even have her own work. It all started during some small talk during a meeting; the vice-department chief told this to her subordinates as a funny story, which then spread like wildfire until it had taken on a life of its own.

Archfiend Pam was truly terrible with technology. It supposedly took less than three days for the tone of the tale to turn to angry lament that this would inevitably hurt the prestige of the Department of Diplomacy, besmirching the plan of pure e-book sales and making them a laughingstock.

Department of Diplomacy management, unaware that they had caused this issue, were in fact impressed. At the same time, they knew they'd feel bad for Archfiend Pam if they let things go on like this.

The vice-department chief basically ordered a high-ranked staff member to "help out Archfiend Pam a little so that she can use the e-book, and if it's no use, then oh well." Unsure if this so-called order even counted as work, the staff member figured they could simply leave it to their subordinates. This turned into a game of hot potato where the next subordinate figured, *If it's about the Archfiend Cram School, then it'd be best to make the Cram School do it,* and handed off the order to someone else.

Each time the job was passed down the line, the tone of the vice-department chief's order gradually became more severe so that the next subordinate would take it a little more seriously. Once it reached the Department of Diplomacy staff member who was the most senior among the Archfiend Cram School alumni, she was told to "be ready to lay down your life for this task." She became even more motivated, thinking she had been entrusted with a very important mission.

She was one of the members of the very first class of the Cram School, nicknamed the Seven Great Devils. They were not called the Devils because they were students of the Archfiend. They were called the Devils because they were like devils. She got together a whole bunch of magical girls who couldn't say no to a summons from a scary senior. Unlike the Archfiend, who was fundamentally kind to her students, the Devils were just devils right to the very core. Opposing one meant death, a punishment worse than death, or fleeing capture for who knew how long.

And so the Archfiend Cram School students and graduates were forced to join in on this. But it wasn't like they had no enthusiasm at all. No matter what the occasion, they still had respect for Archfiend Pam in their hearts.

"I mean, that's just how old people are. Always bad with technology," said a magical girl who was sprawled out on a sofa's backrest, her fox tail swishing back and forth. The way she was talking made a number of people blanch. One person even got ready to take a swing at her, but Slaylie, Complaints Incarnated, cut in by clearing her throat at just the right moment.

"Calm down, people. It's not like Amy being rude is anything new," Slaylie urged.

Amy gave a forced shrug and shook her head. "Uh, it's the truth, though. My grandma struggles just to use an old flip phone."

"The Archfiend's age has nothing to do with this," said another girl.

"Wow, Monako, you're turning on me, too?"

"I'm not," Monako replied. "I'm just saying, does being old mean you break every single magical phone you get? That goes way beyond being tech illiterate or from a different generation."

"Yeah, true."

"I feel like the Archfiend's built that way," said Slaylie. "Which means there's nothing to be done about it."

"I don't think we should leave it at that, pon."

All present—dozens of Archfiend Cram School-related parties packed tightly into a fairly small wooden-floored room, standing and sitting and overlapping and huddling—turned to look toward the voice: the flickering black-and-white hologram that came from a magical phone on a glass table. The image did a spin in the air, then scattered yellow dust. All the while, nobody said a word, and the only sound that could be heard was Twin Dragons Panas frying veggies in the kitchen.

"An Archfiend Cram School graduate actually studied Archfiend Pam's physical constitution, pon," said Fishfire BC's mascot character, Fai, causing the magical girls to murmur among themselves.

To them, Archfiend Pam was sacrosanct. Indignation and shock spread at the bold godlessness of a graduate of the School being so outrageous as to try to research Archfiend Pam.

"Who's the insolent twit who pulled a thing like that?"

"Musician of the Forest, Cranberry, pon."

Further murmuring followed. The Musician of the Forest, Cranberry, was the sole magical girl who had graduated by clearing the Cram School graduation condition to "land one hit on Archfiend Pam."

"Where is she today?"

"She *never* comes to gatherings like this one."

"Fav, that disgusting piece of trash who passes as her mascot character, left behind his observations of the Archfiend, pon. Look at this video, pon."

"Filming without her consent! How nasty."

"Can I get a copy?"

"Wow…she breaks every device she touches, without exception: PCs, smartphones, landlines."

"That's bizarre."

"There's clearly something strange going on here. Can you even call that 'tech illiterate'?"

"There's gotta be a cause to all this."

"Like her wings emit special electromagnetic waves that damage machines…or something?"

"Seems plausible."

"I dunno if it's electromagnetic waves or what, but yeah, her wings might be the cause."

"Maybe…her wings sense her avoidance of technology and activate her magic automatically?"

"Whoa, totally plausible. Her wings could definitely do that sort of thing."

"So then, if we think up a way to block her wings and put it into an e-reader…"

"But we have to know what type of magic it is, or we can't block it."

"Electromagnetic waves, radiation, ultrasonic waves."

"I think it might be her demonic fighting spirit or dark ether, that sort of thing."

"That's gotta be it. She's an Archfiend; she *should* have that much."

"It's fair to assume that she's emitting something from her wings."

"Basically, if we know what's coming out of those wings, then we'll be able to do something about it, pon. We could consult a specialist if we acquire a piece of Archfiend Pam's wings, pon."

"Do you think she'll actually give us a piece if we ask her?"

"She can be stubborn when it comes to technology."

The conversation heated up until someone interrupted:

"Hey."

Everyone looked toward the speaker at once—it was the beautician magical girl, Styler Mimi, leaning against the wall with her arms folded, seemingly in a bad mood.

"Keep your voices down. You'll bother the neighbors."

The magical girls had to obey her; this was her house, after all. They resumed their talk at a softer volume.

"So then, what? We get a piece of her wings by force?"

"People would die."

"I mean…we're doing this for the Archfiend's sake. Putting my life on the line for her is all I ever wanted."

"We'll assemble a suicide squad. Go at her with ten elite members at once."

"Let's make that our last option—I'd rather take a different approach wherever possible."

"What, you scared?"

"Of course I'm scared."

"Let's try getting help from the IT Department under the pretense that we're developing a new e-reader."

"I hear they're super busy right now, though."

"We just need to put everything into convincing them."

"I think I'll also look for help from the Archfiend's friend Lady Proud in the Department of Diplomacy. She should know more things about the Archfiend that we aren't aware of."

"I've heard that she gets really morose if you bring up the Archfiend Cram School with her, though."

"We just need to put everything into convincing her."

"Let's have the Magical Girl Management Department search for a magical girl who can erase particular magic."

"Doesn't Chief Ragi Something-or-Other hate magical girls, though?"

"We just need to put everything into convincing him."

"All right, we've got a basic framework for our plan. Make sure to report, keep in contact, and consult headquarters frequently."

As the magical girls' conversation was heating up, one of them cut in with an "Um." Everyone looked toward her at once. Styler Mimi had an imploring expression, both hands in front of her like she was grasping at something, her gaze sweeping over the magical girls from right to left. "Exactly where are you referring to as headquarters? You don't mean here, do you?"

The magical girls turned back in the opposite direction and started discussing personnel configuration.

◇ Special Strategy Headquarters: One Month Later

The population density and discomfort index had drastically reduced compared to their first meeting, and now the headquarters, a.k.a. Styler Mimi's house, was a comfortable space—or so one would think. But though there were fewer people, the air was leaden and somber.

There was currently a total of four magical girls in the living room. Styler Mimi, tap-tapping on her upper arm with her index finger, stood in the same position as before; Void Roar Flodite had her right arm hung in a cast as she sat on a rattan chair, looking up at nothing in particular on the ceiling; the Demon Swordmaster Alondia was curled up in the corner of the room in battered and scorched armor with her arms around her sword, which was broken clean in two; and Lake of Fire Flame Flamey stirred restlessly on the sofa, her whole body wrapped in bandages with just about no skin showing.

Nobody said a word. The only sounds were Twin Dragons Panas chopping green onions in the kitchen and Flamey's bandages rustling.

Styler Mimi heaved a deliberate sigh. "So? Did it go well?"

"Yeah…it was a success," said Flodite. "She has *The Way of the Archfiend* now, and she can read it at any time, so I think it's fair to say that it went well…I think…"

Alondia struck the flat of her blade with her fist. "Can you honestly say that this went well?!"

"I have to, or I won't be able to handle it!"

The two magical girls stood up, glared at each other, and eventually both averted their eyes at the same time, breathing deep sighs as they sat back down. Flamey mumbled something.

Styler Mimi snorted, making no effort to conceal her irritation and contempt. "Basically, you accomplished your goal, but there were a lot of sacrifices, right?"

"That's…not wrong, yeah." Flodite nodded weakly and then looked around. "Amy and Monako aren't coming? They weren't even wounded."

"That's *exactly* why they can't come. You won't get injured if you run away first thing."

Alondia and Flodite were both heavily wounded, but it was fair to say that was far better than the magical girls who weren't able to come.

The IT Department had been busy, but they had readily promised to help.

Since Lady Proud was a member of the Department of Diplomacy, which was basically the territory of the Archfiend Cram School originally, they'd thought that she wouldn't refuse them, but contrary to their expectations, her reaction had been sour. So then, with the prior information from a member of the Department of Diplomacy that she liked children, all the youngest-looking graduates got together to lean on her and act sweet to make the request, and they somehow got her to agree.

Things went smoothly up to that point. Next was where the problems began.

They made progress with the IT Department and the Department of Diplomacy largely according to plan. So next, the group thronged into the Magical Girl Management Department to put everything into convincing them, and—as they discovered after the fact—this was mistaken as an attack from discontents, and they wound up fighting with the security homunculi.

Beam attacks had flashed and lightning had flown. A homunculus so giant it pierced the heavens had swung a fist and dug into the ground, and the rarely seen Archfiend Cram School fusion skill blasted away a group of hundreds of demons. The battle lasted a few hours, and famous and tough fighters broke their blades and their bones, running out of arrows and spirit as they fell to be snatched away by retrieval drones. But the magical girls didn't give up until the very end. Their pride as the very strongest group of magical girls continued to support their bodies as they went past their limits.

The magical girls' drop-out rate went over 50 percent, and aside from the Magical Girl Department building, the area two miles around them was leveled. But even so, the girls never let up in their attack. This generated great damage on both sides, and in the end, the Archfiend Cram School won. They took out the security team and moved on, thinking they could break into the Management Department now. However, the few magical girls who intruded on department grounds then vanished. They'd stepped on a trap and been expelled to a different dimension.

The more experienced fighters quickly understood that the Chief of the Management Department had completed a ritual and chant during the few hours of the fight. When something like that happened, magical girls couldn't beat a mage.

The order for retreat came, and the magical girls immediately reversed course—running, or flying. That was when Marika Fukuroi, who had not been invited, burst onto the scene. The remaining fighters were beaten to a pulp. They had enough forces that in a straight fight ten of them could have restrained Marika, but not only were their forces halved by then, they had been caught by surprise when they were already exhausted from hours of combat. There was no way they were going to win.

And so the unit was destroyed. Ninety-five percent of them wound up in the hospital, 3 percent were scooped out of the other dimension and then continuously lectured by the Chief of the Management Department, and the remainder were either going around apologizing to all related parties or at the headquarters sighing.

And then, despite the destruction of their main force, the plan proceeded.

They convinced the Archfiend through Lady Proud, and with the cooperation of the chief of the IT Department, they did a study of the Archfiend's physical constitution. As a result, it became clear that her wings did not emit electromagnetic waves, radiation, poisonous gas, wave motions, energy, prana, or aura—it was ultimately the Archfiend's individual nature that was the problem. They did a number of tests and learned that damage to the devices was directly linked to errors in operation. So they reduced the device's function and simplified operation, only to have it destroyed anyway. They strengthened it with magic, but it was still destroyed so thoroughly that even the self-repair function via nanomachines didn't make it in time, and no methods of calming her down—voluntarily or by force—had any effect at all. The number of terminals destroyed by Archfiend Pam surpassed one thousand.

On the third day of testing, the IT Department Chief snapped. If it was no good no matter what they did, then why not do it like this, they figured—and they printed out the e-book and made it into a booklet, enabling Archfiend Pam to acquire *The Way of the Archfiend.* It was kind of mistaking the means for the end, but everyone involved was already mentally close to their limits—not just the IT Department Chief—and the Archfiend was satisfied, so they decided this was fine.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

Twin Dragons Panas, carrying a steaming bowl of ramen in one hand and a bowl of rice in the other, poked her head out into the living room through the beaded curtain. The scent of ramen broth wafted from the kitchen.

"Um," said Mimi, "it stinks up the whole house when you make ramen in here, you know."

"It'll be fine. The flavoring in this one's pretty light. Go on, eat before it gets cold."

Some of the magical girls sighed and some continued to hang their heads as they accepted the ramen, rice bowls, and chopsticks, and they silently began to eat. The only sounds were the slurping of noodles and broth and the blowing on the hot noodles to cool them down. Panas nodded in satisfaction. Having taken on a logistics role, she didn't go to the front lines; her body and costume were perfect and unmarked. And there was also no sense about her that this weighed on her mind, like, *I feel bad for being the only one to be somewhere safe making ramen.*

Panas held up the magical phone in her right hand and rapped on it with her left as if she was knocking on a door.

"I just got a message."

"You did?"

"It's from Haughty Hierarch Cyphil, who was at a Department of Diplomacy luncheon. Apparently, since *The Way of the Archfiend* sold well, they're gonna publish another book. The Archfiend was talking about how she'll try using a word processor this time, and Cyphil agreed that she should definitely do that—"

Alondia smashed the window and jumped out, Flodite followed without missing a beat, and Styler Mimi covered her head and screamed. Flamey tried to leap out after the other two, but the bandages on her legs made her stumble. She squirmed around on the carpet.

Panas lent a hand to pull her up. "Now then," Panas said, "it seems that the Archfiend wants a word processor. What are you going to do?"

Flamey shook her head wildly and waved her hands in front of her face.

Panas looked deeply moved. "Flamey…," she muttered. "You would still go on, even that badly wounded?"

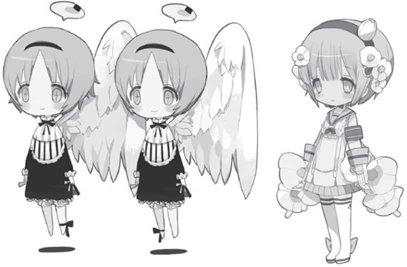
Flamey tried waving her hands even harder, but then she let out a pained shriek and clutched her arm.

"That's some incredible motivation when you've got bone fractures in the triple digits. You're the paragon of the Archfiend Cram School."

Panas laid a hand over Flamey's and lifted them up. Flamey continued moaning in agony, and because of that, nobody heard Mimi whisper, "Please do this somewhere else…"

Magical☆Test of Courage

This story takes place shortly before the *Magical Girl Raising Project* game begins.



Debut

TV anime *Magical Girl Raising Project*
Blu-ray/DVD special booklet 1

Magical☆Test of Courage

◇ Koyuki Himekawa

"Huh? You're coming with us for the test of courage, Koyuki?"

"I dunno if that's a good idea. We might actually run into something!" Sumire dangled her hands in front of her face to mime a ghost.

Koyuki shook her head. "I'll be okay. I'm not scared of monsters or ghosts."

"You don't have to act tough."

"I'm not," Koyuki insisted, her smile bright enough to dispel the unease in Sumire's and Yoshiko's expressions.

Sumire closed her eyes and nodded heavily, then pulled Koyuki into a tight hug. "You've gotten so much stronger."

"Come on, Sumi… You're being dramatic."

Yoshiko still seemed unsure. She heaved a sigh and shrugged. "Well, when you faint or pee yourself, I'll make sure you're taken care of."

Koyuki smiled uncomfortably, still in Sumire's hug, and scratched her head.

◇ Minael

Minael was the first one to notice the change in them all.

Ten days earlier, her team did a big cleanup of Ouketsuji, the abandoned temple they used as their base, under the orders of the worst leader ever. Ruler was so overbearing, she just gave commands while hardly working at all herself. They'd been told to sweep the dust and wipe the soot and throw out the trash, but there was so much of it, Minael sneakily stuffed it under the floor. *Now that'll make this place easier to use as a hideout,* she thought—but only briefly, as the next day, she felt fatigued.

It was difficult to force herself to move, and when she sat around, she did nothing but yawn. Though she was basically fine when she was at home, whenever she was at Ouketsuji, it made her want to sleep or sit down. Being in her magical girl form usually made her feel light and encouraged her to move more than when she was human, but now was different. When she looked around again, wondering if it was just her, she found something strange about the other magical girls, too.

Ruler kept on sighing. Blunders that normally would have had her yelling and raging got off with just a light scolding. She was also making fewer orders and declarations. There wasn't any spirit in her words.

Tama was the type to stare into space to begin with, but now her tendency to be off in the clouds was even more marked. She made more careless errors and minor blunders, and began falling frequently into the holes she'd dug herself.

Swim Swim started off sitting formally on her knees, but then her shoulders drooped and her back rounded. When she noticed this was happening, she tried to sit properly only for her posture to deteriorate again, and she ended up repeating this routine over and over.

It wasn't because Minael was particularly sharp that she was the first one to notice these minute changes. With Tama and Swim Swim, it was because they were zoning out particularly hard, and with Ruler, it was because of the way she'd never acknowledge a single problem herself. Minael exchanged a look with Yunael, confirming that she'd also noticed, and once they were home, they discussed why this was happening.

"What's up with everyone?"

"Delayed Sunday scaries?"

"Wanna try talking to Ruler about it?"

"Come on, you think she'd acknowledge it? Besides, if we say we're tired, she might get mad."

"So do we try waiting until she talks?"

They didn't come to a conclusion that day and decided to put it off for a little longer, to see how things went. During the next few days, Ruler continued to sigh a lot, Tama made mistakes, and Swim Swim couldn't sit properly. There had been plenty of times before when someone had screwed up, and Ruler had gotten mad, and the atmosphere had gotten all tense—but things had never gotten uncomfortable like this. It was aggravating that the twins were the only ones bewildered by it.

It became too much work to think about it themselves any longer, so the twins tried hitting up Top Speed, who called herself a good friend of Ruler's. On top of a high-rise, Minael grabbed Top Speed's right arm and Yunael grabbed her left, tugging and wailing for her to talk to them.

"Wait, wait, wait—what the heck, you guys? What's going on?" said Top Speed.

"Things've been weird lately."

"They're *weird.*"

"Weird…? You guys are *always* weird."

"Rude!"

"How dare you!"

Top Speed glanced at the ninja-looking magical girl who was leaning against the wall and looking over at them, and the ninja quietly averted her eyes.

Top Speed flashed a strained smile and looked alternately between the two angels. "Sorry, sorry," she said. "Don't get so mad."

"We're not mad! Just listen to us."

"I've *been* listening to you," Top Speed insisted.

"We feel real sluggish."

"There's something funny going on."

"Ruler seems tired, too, and everyone else is zoning out."

"Well, your team's base is real musty and dank, right?" said Top Speed. "No wonder you're feeling low. Wouldn't moving to someplace clearer and breezier solve the problem?"

"Even if we suggested that, Ruler would never listen."

"It took her so long to find this place, after all."

"The princess is so proud of her castle—that stupid old temple."

"So then…"

Top Speed squeezed her eyes and mouth shut in an expression like she was thinking, but since she had angels hanging off both arms, she didn't really look like a deep thinker. "Hmm… How about you try remodeling the place?"

"Remodeling?"

"They say that switching where you put stuff or changing the wallpaper and little tweaks like that can bring good luck or make you more cheerful, right? Like feng shui, I think it's called?"

"Sounds sus."

"For real. Totally sus."

"No, seriously, at the end of the day it's all about perspective. Like if a room is brighter, your mood brightens, too. Whaddaya call it…the placebo thing?"

"Isn't this kinda different?"

"If they're similar, you can basically call them the same thing."

"You think? I mean, sure, I guess."

"And wait—feng shui doesn't seem very *you*, Top Speed. Your outfit is more Western. Isn't feng shui Chinese?"

"Feng shui is basically like magic," Top Speed told the angels. "It's normal for witches to cast magic."

"Huh," said Minael. "You have a point."

"Hmm…what do we do, sis?" Yunael asked.

"Yeah… Might as well give it a shot."

"Ruler's so unmotivated right now that just rearranging stuff probably won't make her mad."

"Then let's try it out. Thanks, sorta, Top Speed."

"No need to thank me. We're all magical girls here."

The twins went back home to search online about feng shui, wrote down some notes, and took that to Ouketsuji. Though Ruler trashed it and called it useless and foolish, after seeing Yunael and Minael write in their star sign and blood type on a piece of calligraphy paper, even she joined in arrogantly like, "Well, I wouldn't be opposed to blessing you with my presence from time to time." They got together the data they needed, and based on that, they tried changing the positions of things and placing small housewares around and such. Then three days later, at the point when they were feeling so tired, it reached the point of dizziness and headaches, the twins once again headed to the building where Top Speed was.

"That didn't fix it at all!"

"Top Speed, you liar!"

The twins got right in her face.

"Hey, you guys, hold on, don't cling to me like that." Recoiling from them, Top Speed looked over at the ninja magical girl, but she quietly averted her eyes. Top Speed sighed. "Fine, fine. I'll take the blame. Anyway, tell me whatcha did."

"We did lots of things—*lots*."

"We did so much, it's, like, legit unbelievable that nothing happened.”

One by one, Top Speed checked over the big collection of charms that the twins shoved at her, and after flipping through a bunch, her hands stopped. She groaned quietly as she checked over one piece of straw paper multiple times. “Huh? This one here…”

“What is it? What is it?”

“Spit it out! If you’re just being full of it, we’ll totally flip.”

“I’ll tell you, so get off me a second. You guys are heavier than you look.”

Letting the angels down off her arms, Top Speed turned on her magical phone, checked something, and nodded.

“Knew it,” she said. “Look at Ruler’s star sign—isn’t her birthday either this month or next month?”

Minael went “Huh?” right as Yunael went “What?!” which was immediately followed by Top Speed finishing off with a “Hey, now.”

She brought the twins closer in both arms. “We might as well celebrate.”

“Why?!”

“Why celebrate that crazy hag’s birth?!”

“Come on, just listen. If the mood is the problem, then if you throw a big event like a birthday party, it’ll get everyone excited, and you might feel more energized, too, right? Let’s go all out and blow away the gloom.”

The twin angels groaned.

“What do we do, sis?” Yunael asked Minael.

“If we have a party, then we can slack off that day without getting in trouble, right?”

“Yeah, that’s a good point.”

“Besides, I love parties.”

“You really are a party person, huh?”

Top Speed laughed. “I’ll help you set up, don’t worry,” she told them. “Hey Ripple, you help, too—”

The ninja magical girl was already gone.

◇ Koyuki Himekawa

A public holiday, the weekend, and the anniversary of the school’s founding created an impromptu four-day weekend. The back-to-back holidays—sort of like Golden Week—got all the students excited.

The Koyuki, Yoshiko, and Sumire trio were not thinking to just spend the holiday idly. They were discussing going somewhere, but they had no money.

“How about we go hunting for a *tsuchinoko*?” Sumire suggested. “I hear somebody saw one in the mountains near M City. We’ll get paid if we find one, so it’s two birds with one stone, right?”

Yoshiko made a show of sighing. “Here we go again with your weird interests.”

“What’s weird about this?”

“You’re so into hunting for things that don’t exist, like a *tsuchinoko*, or Nessie, or Bigfoot, yetis, aliens, ghosts, magical girls. You can do that stuff on your own if you want, but don’t drag me and Koyuki into it.”

Koyuki flashed an evasive smile.

Sumire snorted indignantly. “Why are you assuming they don’t exist?!” she demanded.

“I mean, they just don’t.”

“Then prove it!”

“At least pick a different hill to die on.”

It looked like things were getting weird. They’d gotten derailed from their discussion of going to have fun somewhere to the two of them getting worked up and arguing about whether supernatural things existed or not.

“I’m gonna make you realize that ghosts, UFOs, and aliens are real, Yoshi.”

“Go ahead and try.”

“Aha! Okay, then we’ll do a test of courage at the ultimate spooky spot. This isn’t gonna be some *tsuchinoko*-hunt amateur hour. We’re going to a serious, real-deal, super-dangerous location. I might reconsider if you get freaked out and apologize, though.”

“Why would I freak out over something that doesn’t exist and then have to apologize for no reason?”

“No looking back now!”

Things moved along without a hitch, and so they wound up doing the test of courage for their holiday excursion. Searching for a *tsuchinoko* could have been done as casually as a side thing to a picnic, but that wouldn’t do for a test of courage. Sumire would normally never try this sort of challenge, and typically Yoshiko would not get this stubborn. It was dangerous for middle school girls to visit a desolate spot at night, even without any spiritual happenings. If Sumire and Yoshiko had any good sense, then they would realize that danger and quit while they were ahead. But this was what it meant to give tit for tat. The both of them had gotten emotional, and they had failed to realize the obvious.

That was why Koyuki opted to join them. It was dangerous to let the two of them go on their own. If she went with them, then she could stop them—and if necessary, transform into Snow White and eliminate the danger. Sumire and Yoshiko, who didn't know that Koyuki was a magical girl, had opposed her coming with them, but she stubbornly insisted that she would be fine.

"Isn't it kind of the wrong season for a test of courage?" asked Yoshiko.

"Spooky spots are a limited-time-only thing," Sumire replied. "They'll often just disappear if you wait for the right season."

"Really? Why?"

"I mean, these places are usually ruins and stuff, right? Those kinds of things can be knocked down at any time. Next thing you know, they get turned into parking lots. Heh-heh."

"Why are you acting all smug about that?"

"As a spookiness expert, I'm just educating the less experienced. We're not doing some silly little haunted house tour like the popular kids do. We'll be setting foot on some serious, real-deal, actually dangerous spots, so I need you to be extra careful. You'll literally get the shivers."

"What, because it's cold?"

"No, I mean like you feel sick, or lethargic, or dizzy, or you'll get a headache and zone out—that sort of stuff."

"Isn't that just menopause?"

"It's got nothing to do with your age!"

If Koyuki openly admitted that she and her friends were testing their courage somewhere haunted, then her parents would stop her. Her cover story was that they were setting off fireworks at a friend's house, but her father was still worried—she managed to get permission under the condition that she would keep in touch with him and have him pick her up when they were done.

Koyuki felt guilty about lying to her parents, but she encouraged herself by saying that this was all a part of her magical girl activities. She couldn't abandon her friends when they were trying to do something dangerous. If she tried stopping them, they wouldn't listen to her anyway; since she could transform into a magical girl, it was best for her to accompany them.

She messaged La Pucelle—"I can't come today; something came up on my end that I can't get out of"—and then went with her friends. Sumire and Yoshiko had come to pick her up at her house, and then the three of them headed to their goal.

When she checked the time on her phone, it was past nine o'clock. The sun had fully set; there were few people passing by, and the streetlights weren't quite trustworthy, either. She had thought that she'd gotten used to going out at night since she'd become a magical girl, but now going out into the night streets as a human, helplessness welled within her.

Koyuki pressed her lips in a tight line and shook her head.

"What's wrong, Koyuki?"

"No, it's nothing. Just getting myself psyched up." She smiled as encouragingly as she could.

◇ **Minael**

"Hey, welcome."

"'Sup. Ruler isn't here yet?"

"Not yet, but she could show up at any time."

"By the way, Top Speed, who's that…?"

"Good evening! This is quite, how do I put it, um, a classical spot."

Another magical girl was floating behind Top Speed, wearing pajamas with a pillow under each arm, for a total of two pillows. She scanned the room curiously, restlessly—eyeing the Buddha statue and poking at it, looking at the broken floor and peeking into a hole, then flying up to the ceiling out of curiosity about a stain.

"Could you be…Nemurin?"

"That's right. I'm Nemuriiin. Top Speed invited me, so I left the house for once."

"Ohhh…so Nemurin exists in real life, sis," said Yunael.

"I thought for sure she was a program built into the chat room or something," said Minael.

"Eh-heh-heh."

Nemurin, the magical girl in pajamas, did a turn in midair, and then another turn the other way. She was smiling with amusement, although Minael couldn't tell what was so funny. The main temple building was quite large, but Nemurin was bouncing around too much; with each movement, her white fluff stroked the ceiling and floor and stirred up dust. Minael and Yunael coughed and yelled at her to stop until she finally did.

"You're pretty active for someone who says they never go outside."

"I'm just a little excited over being out and about for once," Nemurin said.

"If you break something, we're the ones who'll pay for it, just so you know."

"Sorry, sorry."

"So you were close with Ruler, Nemurin?"

"Nah, Ruler doesn't post in the chat much. Hopefully we get to know each other today."

"Just having you around makes things feel more chill, Nemurin. I'm glad you're here with us."

"You're kinda like a scented candle."

"You've got a soothing vibe."

"Eh-heh-heh."

At any rate, the participants had all gathered. Everyone decorated all over with the paper chains they'd been working on diligently and secretly on the side, Swim Swim hung from the ceiling the paper tiara and scepter and such she'd made at home, the twins placed the folding table they'd made at home in the center of the main temple building, and Top Speed placed her homemade cake on top of said table. A Ruler with a smug, haughty face was drawn on it deliciously with whipped cream and fruit.

"It looks so tasty!" said Tama, her eyes sparkling as she leaned close to the cake.

"Hey, hey, Tama, don't drool on it."

"It does look really good, though. Even though it looks like Ruler."

The twins pushed Tama aside.

Nemurin ran over as well. "Show me, show me!"

Then, right as Nemurin was about to approach the cake, Swim Swim stood in her way and said, "Wait."

"Huh? What? Nemurin wants to see the cake, too!" Nemurin puffed up her cheeks to express her displeasure.

Swim Swim pointed at her. “You’ve got dust on you.”

The twin angels also looked over at Nemurin, their brows immediately furrowing.

“You’re right! She’s super dirty!”

“Huh? It’s that bad?”

“No, no, I mean this stuff!!”

Nemurin herself was fine, but the white fluff that wafted around her was all dusty and dirtied black.

“It’s ’cause you’ve got those things that collect dust and you keep poking around everywhere.”

“Go leave them outside.”

“Awww… But the Nemurin antennae will get lonely.”

“It’s just for a little while, so suck it up.”

“Top Speed brought her broom inside, though!”

“Me and Rapid Swallow are a package deal. We explode if we’re apart.”

Nemurin repeated, “I don’t wanna,” over and over, but she still went outside with her Nemurin antennae. When she came back, her fluffy fuzzies were gone, and she was in simple style: just her pajamas, pillows, and socks. And there was another magical girl with her.

“Hey! What on earth are you all doing?! Why is Nemurin here…and even Top Speed?! You can’t just come in without my permission—”

With Ruler showing up, clearly angry, Tama, Swim Swim, Minael and Yunael, and Top Speed pulled out the crackers they’d brought and pulled the strings. Popping sounds echoed in the temple hall and confetti and paper tape flew through the air, fluttering down on top of Ruler, as her expression changed from anger to confusion. Top Speed counted them in with a “One, two, three…,” and then the magical girls said the celebratory words: “Happy birthday!” and Ruler’s expression changed from confusion to something indescribable.

◇ Koyuki Himekawa

“So where are we going today?”

“A temple.”

“Are we allowed to just go in?”

“I mean, it might not exactly be legal…but it’s just a run-down old temple, and I don’t think anyone’s living there, so they’re not gonna have security cameras or anything like that.”

“Sounds sketchy as all get out.”

“And a little scary, too.”

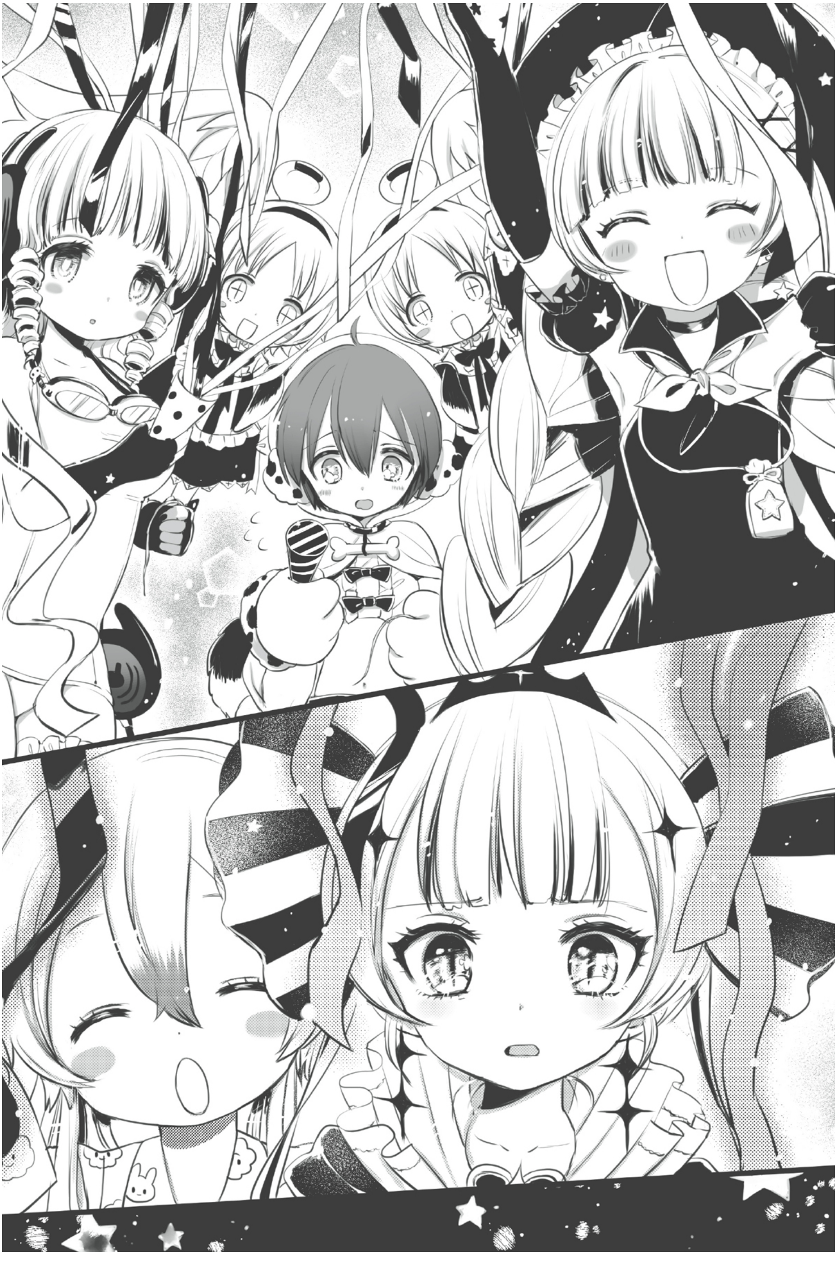
“It’ll be fine. You can never chase your fantasies if you worry about the law. And more importantly, it’s an amazing temple. I’ve checked it out twice, and it’s crazy run-down—plus, I hear there’s been sightings.”

“Hmm.”

“Apparently, someone saw a shadowy figure there one night.”

“Hey, isn’t it a little dangerous to go to a place like that at night?”

“No worries—we have this.”



Sumire opened up her bag and started pulling out unfamiliar items one after another. “We’ve got purifying salt, evil-repelling talismans, a cross, and holy water. Don’t hesitate to use this stuff if things get dicey.”

“More useless junk.” Yoshiko furrowed her brow suspiciously.

Sumire, on the other hand, was smiling. “You’ll soon find out that what I’ve been saying is true.”

“As if.”

“Hey, you never know,” said Koyuki.

“Exactly! Seeing is believing. You really get it, Koyuki.”

Sumire started getting excited, clapping her hands in glee. Yoshiko breathed a small sigh. She shook her head at Koyuki, who smiled back at her awkwardly.

“So what’s the temple called?”

“It’s hard to see ’cause it’s worn down, but the name Ouketsuji’s written there.”

◇ Yunael

“Happy birthday, Ruler.”

Swim Swim opened the box, and an automatic cleaning machine came out from inside.

“Ohhh, ain’t this pretty expensive?” said Top Speed.

“I brought it from home.”

“Ah, there’s one from me, too.”

Ruler stripped the wrapping off the sizable package Tama brought out to reveal a trilobite fossil as big as two fists together.

“That’s amazing—is it real?” Top Speed crowed.

“Nemurin brought something, too. Happy birthday, Ruler.” Nemurin offered up the pillow she was carrying under her left arm. Seen up close, it was decorated with a pink ribbon. “It’s a cutting-edge pillow made with special cushioning developed by NASA. It’s amazing stuff, the best modern science has to offer. Using this, anyone will get a good night’s sl…zzzzzz.”

“Hey, don’t go falling asleep on your present. You’re gonna get drool all over it.”

“Everyone brought such amazing stuff. It’s gonna make the cake I baked look so shabby,” said Top Speed.

“That’s not true. This cake looks really good.”

“Yeah, yeah. This chicken is good, too.”

“Yummy!”

Extravagant tributes kept on being piled up beside Ruler. It was just as if she were a real princess, like her appearance implied. Ruler put on a dignified expression and nodded heavily each time a present was offered to her, but her nostrils were flared, and there was redness in her cheeks.

“Hey, what about our present?” Minael whispered to Yunael.

“This is it.” Scrawled on the stack of paper that Yunael quietly offered was a coupon for a shoulder massage.

“You think it looks bad if we’re the only ones giving a shoulder massage coupon?”

“It does… Look at everyone else—they all brought luxury items.”

“It’s like, are we back in the bubble economy days or what?”

“What do we do, sis?”

“What if you turn into a gold bar or a diamond or something and make that the present, Yuna?”

“How long am I supposed to stay transformed? Wouldn’t we eventually get found out?”

“True. Okay. In that case…let’s look for something from down there.”

“You mean… *there*? Can we even make anything from there into a present?”

“It’ll be way better than a shoulder massage ticket. Go for it, Yuna.”

Taking advantage of a moment when eyes were on the presents, Yunael transformed into a big centipede and slipped her way through the cracks of the broken floorboards. A whole bunch of junk had come out in the big clean the other day. Ruler had ordered them to separate it all and put it out with the trash, but there was no way they’d bother with a hassle like that, so they had quietly crammed it under the floor. Yunael would look through that for something that seemed legit.

They could insist that a rock was an expensive garden stone, and there was also the option of claiming some old withered tree branch was a famous fragrant wood. They just needed something that would satisfy the authoritarian Ruler, something that wouldn’t look bad compared to the other gifts, something that looked extravagant.

Yunael skittered her legs, her body undulating along as she scoured the mountain of junk. She had the feeling that maybe (or maybe not) there could be something that didn't look like junk, something among the old things that was kind of tasteful. *Not this, not that,* she thought, in search of such an object.

Eventually, she reached the bottom of the junk pile and clasped what came up in her pincers. After gingerly pulling out the item, she turned herself into a raccoon to wipe off the mud and pat off the dirt. It was a pot that could fit in a human's palm. Despite its small size, it had a carefully placed lid on top. It was quite old. Not being a connoisseur, Yunael couldn't tell what it was for. Frankly speaking, it was battered, old-looking, and junky, but one could say that being so old gave it a strange appeal.

"Hey Yuna, you're still not done?"

She heard Minael's voice. She was probably whispering through the hole in the floor. Yunael returned to the hole holding the pot, then pushed the pot upward, transforming herself once more into a centipede to return to the main temple building, where she undid her transformation.

"We've got a present from us, too."

Trying to settle her racing heart, Yunael carried the jar to Ruler as if she'd had it all along. Ruler looked at the jar with great interest. Not a bad response.

"This is an Azuchi-Momoyama period jar we won at an auction."

That BSing came out real smooth, if I do say so myself, Yunael thought, impressed.

"Ohhh, that's some pretty fancy stuff. Wasn't that expensive?" said Top Speed.

"Sort of. But the price doesn't really matter. Ruler always does so much for us, so we wanted to give her something good to show our thanks."

Tama seemed glad. Swim Swim applauded impassively while Nemurin acted all knowledgeable: "Maybe Sen no Rikyu used it." Ruler looked up at the ceiling, blinked twice, averted her face with a sigh, and then turned back to Minael and Yunael.

"...You got me something rather thoughtful, for a couple of idiots."

What a way to talk to us when we went to all that trouble to get you *a present*, thought Minael. But she kept her annoyed comment to herself and said proudly, “Anything for you, Ruler.”

“You guys…” Ruler wiped her eyes and turned back to the other magical girls. “Today’s not my birthday, though.”

“Well, we only know your star sign.”

“Hmm. Whatever.”

Ruler picked up a wineglass. It was filled to the brim with red wine that Top Speed had brought her.

“Cheers.”

She held up the glass for a while, tilted it, and then swallowed it in one go. The other magical girls all called cheers and clinked their cups and glasses, spilling juice on the floor as the party began. They bit into roast beef, fried chicken, and other stuff they’d brought. Relieved that Ruler had easily accepted her present, Yunael exchanged a look with Minael as she pinched some smoked salmon in her chopsticks and popped it atop her tongue.

Ruler picked up the portable mic that had been placed on the table and furrowed her brow. “What’s the mic for?”

“We’re about to sing karaoke.”

“Huh? Why…?”

“It’s a party essential.”

“It’s very essential.”

“What? Why would we do something so loud and—?”

“I wanna eat cake.”

“Leave dessert for later, Swim Swim,” said Ruler.

“Yeah, after karaoke.”

“That’s not what I’m saying…”

“Who’s gonna sing first?”

“We’ll start off!” said Minael.

“Yaaaay! You’ve got serious pipes, sis!”

◇ Koyuki Himekawa

“Is it just me, or…did you guys hear something coming from the temple?”

“Yeah, it sounded like people talking.”

“Oh come on, now you’re forcing it.”

“No, it’s just… Whatever, let’s keep going.”

The girls nonetheless walked cautiously. Since going through the temple gates, they had been moving forward bit by bit, in tiny steps. They had flashlights for everyone, so there was enough light to walk along, but none of them were making to rush ahead.

Yoshiko had claimed her friends were forcing the spooky vibe, but that was clearly unnecessary: The vibe was already hair-raising. No one would be surprised if a ghost popped up. Even Yoshiko, who was all about living in the moment, had a serious look on her face, and the fingers of her right hand were tinged red where she gripped her flashlight.

Since they were calling it a test of courage, Koyuki had vaguely imagined that maybe they would be going in one by one, but nobody proposed that. Or rather, they probably couldn't. None of them were about to walk into a place like this alone.

Even a delinquent wouldn't choose to make a temple like this their hideout. The stone flooring was broken in places; Koyuki stifled a shriek when she saw the line of Jizo statues with missing heads. The building was damaged enough that it was noticeable even in the dark, and the humid air clung to their skin. The grass was overgrown, and a part of the wall had collapsed. There was a Buddha statue with a missing arm standing to the side of the entrance—there had to be some reason for that.

Koyuki firmly visualized herself as a magical girl. She'd come here in order to show off her strength and courage. She actually wanted the eerie atmosphere. Being able to take that step forward in a situation where everyone was scared was what made her a magical girl.

She sped up just slightly ahead of the group.

"Hey, Koyuki," Yoshiko called, but Koyuki didn't stop—she moved forward with firm steps, then came to a halt.

"What…is that?" she said.

"Are those…voices? Children's voices?" said Sumire.

It sounded like a little girl. A voice like it was singing, or maybe reading sutras, muttering in a fixed rhythm could be heard from the temple. It was joined by another voice that came just a beat later, and then after a while, silence visited again.

The three of them went quiet and looked at the temple. None of them tried to say a word about what they'd just heard, faces pointed in the direction the voices had come from as if paralyzed. The rumors that there were some mysterious beings in this temple seemed to gradually rise from the ground at Koyuki's feet, and she imagined that they would be caught and dragged to the bottom of a bog or something—shaking that off, she clenched her teeth once more.

◇ Minael

"This is how we're starting off?!" said Ruler. "I don't know if that was singing or casting a spell or what. But put yourself in my shoes, being forced to listen to that sort of chanting in a round!"

"Rude!"

"How dare you call the Peaky Angels' vocals casting a spell!"

"Hmph. It's *my* birthday we're celebrating. I'm not about to allow a bunch of amateurs to toot their own horns. A certain level of quality is required, even for simply singing with a karaoke mic."

"Boo! Boooo!"

"Boo! Boooo! Boooooo!"

"Good grief…give me the mic. I'll show you how it's done."

"Whoa, wait your turn," Top Speed said. "I'm next!"

"When did we decide we're going in order?"

"Then I'll sing."

"Butt out, Swim Swim!"

"D-don't fight…ah!"

"Oh no, Tama knocked the salmon over!"

"Bad Tama!"

"Come on, clean it up right away! And stop crying, Tama! It's annoying!"

"S-sorry…ahh!"

"Oh no, Tama knocked over the bag of all the party cracker bits we cleaned up!"

"Bad Tama!"

"Agh, good grief! You people!"

◇ Koyuki Himekawa

A raw smell—like fish—wafted toward them on the wind.

"What's this smell?" said Koyuki.

"It's kinda fishy," said Sumire. "And isn't a warm wind, like…you know, a pretty common theme in ghost stories?"

"Don't be weird," Yoshiko snapped.

"I mean…don't you think it's weird, too, Yoshi? Like those voices before."

"That was just…your imagination."

"No way. That sounded like children chanting a spell. And this odor—" Sumire tilted her head up and sniffed, bringing her brows together. "Huh? It's not fishy… What…is this?"

Koyuki sniffed along with Sumire and found it was indeed different from the earlier fishy smell. "Yeah, I smell it, too. It's like fireworks…or maybe gunpowder?"

"Maybe it's the lingering spirits of soldiers who died on the front lines of battle years ago?"

"Stop it, Sumi," said Yoshiko.

"Sure, I'll stop—but I legit smell something. And there's no way you'd smell gunpowder out in a place like this. It's gotta be some paranormal phenomenon. Accepted it yet, Yoshi?"

"Come on, people are just setting off fireworks somewhere nearby."

"Still in denial? You don't know when to give up—"

There was a *clunk*. Some kind of noise was coming from the temple.

Both Sumire, who was insisting this was a spiritual phenomenon, and Yoshiko, who was denying that such a thing could ever happen, got serious looks on their faces and turned toward the sound.

◇ Minael

"How did you like my beautiful voice? Entrancing, wasn't it?" said Ruler.

"Ooh, that was great, Ruler. You could be a professional singer," said Top Speed.

"Amazing," Nemurin agreed.

"Heh." Ruler snorted smugly.

"Nghh…"

"Ghhh…no! I think that was different from being good at singing!"

"Oh, a sore loser?"

"That was an imitation, not singing!" Minael insisted.

"Yeah, yeah! You made a good point there, sis!" said Yunael.

"Being able to imitate the original singer means you're good at singing," Ruler pointed out.

"But, like, originality is important for a magical girl."

"Yeah, it's super important."

"An imitation doesn't have any originality at all, right?"

"Nope, none."

"You two…!"

"What?"

"Yeah, what?!"

"Stop fighting! It's making me tired!" Tama cried.

"Yeah, let's drop it," Top Speed agreed. "We did all this to celebrate Ruler's birthday."

"Yeah, yeah! Stop it, stop it!"

"Cut it out!"

"Why you little—!"

"Whoa! Ruler snapped!"

"Hey! Don't throw things! That's dangerous!"

"Ow!"

"Eeeep!"

"Watch out."

"Be nice to each other!"

◇ Koyuki Himekawa

They weren't just hearing things, and it wasn't their imagination. This was beyond the level of the sound of the wind or insect noises. The sound of something striking hard could be heard from within the temple.

"I hear a knock! It's a poltergeist!" Sumire cried.

"Hey, Sumi, be quiet," Yoshiko snapped back.

"You heard that, didn't you?! Didn't you?! This is it! This is a supernatural phenomenon!"

"Calm down, Sumi."

"It's the real thing! This temple is legit the real deal!"

"That's obviously not what's happening."

"Why are you being so stubborn, Yoshi?! Just admit it!"

"There's no reason for me to admit to anything. There's either some homeless person squatting there, or it's a hangout spot for some delinquents. It's dangerous, so let's go already."

"Then what were those children's voices just now?!"

"A young homeless person, or a delinquent whose voice hasn't dropped yet…"

"You always have some excuse! You won't believe me, no matter what I say!"

"Hey, Sumi, you're talking too loud. The whole town's gonna hear you."

Sumire swallowed her words, and Yoshiko glared bitterly at the ground. Koyuki shifted her gaze between the two girls.

"No matter which one of you is right, it would be bad if someone found us here," Koyuki told her friends. "I don't want to run into delinquents or paranormal stuff on the edge of town, where we can't expect anyone to help us. Look, let's just go home. It was a bad idea to walk around a place like this at night."

She was finally able to say what she should have said all along.

Sumire made a wordless noise and hung her head.

"Yeah," said Yoshiko. "Maybe we *are* doing something stupid."

"C'mon, let's go home. It doesn't matter who's right and who's wrong—"

Something rustled in the nearby thicket. Koyuki panicked and turned around, and Sumire and Yoshiko, who'd been hanging their heads, jerked their chins up.

"What? What was that, just now?" Sumire said.

"I feel like…there's something there," Yoshiko replied.

"A ghost? A cryptid? Did a *tsuchinoko* come all this way? Oh, or maybe it's a magical girl."

"Ridiculous." Yoshiko took a few steps forward to stand right in front of where the weeds grew thick.

"Hey, Yoshi, don't stand so close—"

"It's probably a stray cat or something. Why are you so freaked out?" She clearly was forcing herself to be positive—she was trembling a bit. "I'm way more of a cat person than a dog person. And it's not one-sided, either—cats like me, too. I've never met a single stray cat that hasn't let me pet it."

Yoshiko parted the grasses and moved into the thicket until she eventually caught sight of something: A number of white somethings, hazy as clouds, were floating deep in the undergrowth.

They looked like cotton. Yoshiko didn't move an inch, as if time had stopped, and neither Sumire nor Koyuki were able to even call out to her, either. A gust of wind blew through, the leaves rustled, the branches creaked, and the white cotton-like things swayed lightly, spinning around.

They were not cotton. On each of the sides that were turned toward them were faces, just like people. The "faces" looked sad and were muttering that they were lonely.

Yoshiko spun around and ran off. Sumire shrieked and fled. Koyuki just about fell, but she somehow got her legs moving. Gone were her convictions about how she was a magical girl and therefore strong of heart. All she could think about was that there really *were* ghosts. She raced through the gates to escape.

The three middle school girls fled, stumbling as they went. They ran back to the shopping district, passing by a few vehicles and some pedestrians who gave them skeptical looks, then slowly came to a stop. Once they realized that they had been gripping each other's hands, they all sighed in unison.

◇ Minael

While flying through the sky, Minael insisted very firmly, "We can't keep letting Ruler act so high and mighty!"

"It's her birthday, so I think it's fine for her to be like that, though," Nemurin said in a relaxed tone as she flew beside them.

Minael glared at her bitterly. "It's *not* fine!"

"Yeah, it's not. No wonder you're mad, sis," Yunael agreed.

Since neither party would back down on the matter of singing, the birthday party had been put on hold. Ruler and the angels had insisted that to settle things conclusively, they needed a proper karaoke machine with a grading system, so they decided that they'd reconvene with a karaoke set that had a serious grading function. Right now, the angels were going back to their house to grab the karaoke set, with help from Top Speed and Nemurin, who were waiting on top of a building.

"No way we'll lose with this."

“Why do you guys have that? How much did it cost?” Top Speed asked.

“The cost doesn’t matter if it’s for the sake of getting a high score in karaoke.”

“Exactly. Listen, your karaoke score isn’t just about whether you’re good or bad—there’s a *trick* to it. More than having a good voice or technique or whatever, whoever learns the trick to scoring points wins. That’s why I chose the rules and brought our own mic and karaoke machine, see. This is common sense if you like karaoke.”

“If it’s such common sense, then how come I’ve never heard of it?” said Top Speed.

“This stuff’s obvious if you’re hard-core into karaoke.”

“Hard-core, yeah.”

“Even Ruler went back home to get her own mic. Plus, she gave Tama and Swim Swim some change and told them to get her some throat lozenges—she’s way more hard-core than us.”

“For sure, Ruler’s super hyped up.”

“She’s still gonna end up losing, though.”

“Sis practiced tons on DUM karaoke.”

“I average 93 points on the *Magical Daisy* opening.”

“Yaaay! *Daisy Carnival*!”

“You guys really are hopeless,” Top Speed said from atop her broomstick.

“If only you and Ruler got along better,” Nemurin added, bobbing in the sky.

But neither of them seemed to mean what they said, and that just made Minael more irritated.

“Like heck I’m gonna be friendly with her! We’ll settle this!” she yelled.

“You still wanna celebrate Ruler’s birthday that bad? You’re a nice girl,” said Top Speed.

“I just hate how she acts so arrogant!”

“My Nemurin antennae are saying that you should get along, too. They say there’s been nothing but fighting today.”

“Who cares about your legion of fluff? Karaoke is more important—karaoke!”

“You’re such a vocal legend, sis.”

◇ Snow White

Koyuki transformed into Snow White and looked up at the temple gates. It had seemed so eerie when she was in human form, but once she was a magical girl, it looked like just an old building…or so she told herself. Even transformed, the fear wouldn't quite go away, but she shoved it deep down and passed through the gates.

If she had been just Koyuki Himekawa, she could have run back to her friends so they could console each other, saying *"Wasn't that scary?"* But since she was a magical girl, she couldn't just leave the mysteries as mysteries. If she left them be, then bad things might happen to someone. And if that happened, then she wouldn't be able to continue her magical girl work as Snow White.

Clenching her teeth, she smothered her fear and went into the thicket, reaching the place where the white faces had been floating—but there was nothing there now, and she breathed a deep sigh.

No, she couldn't relax just yet. She hadn't resolved anything.

She headed for the temple, quietly saying "Pardon me" to announce her visit as she went inside.

Magical girls could see well in the dark. Even without a light, she could observe the interior of the room in detail. A big trilobite fossil, a pillow, a microphone, half-eaten food, juice, wine, mineral water, cake, cutlery, a small pot, a little table, and an automatic cleaner.

What's going on here?

The assortment of stuff didn't really make sense. It looked like some people had been having a party. So was this delinquents, or homeless people, or something inhuman? She picked up a fried chicken leg to find it was still a bit warm. Whoever had been eating it couldn't have gone far.

Were they still nearby? Snow White cautiously looked around the area and was about to quietly proceed inward when she suddenly stopped. She could faintly—just faintly—hear voices.

"It hurts…"

"So thirsty…"

The voice was muttering, but it wasn't out loud. It was the voice of someone's heart.

It was not the high-pitched, childlike voices that she'd heard with Yoshiko and Sumire. It was a parched voice, weedy like a dried-up tree.

"Thirsty… So thirsty…," it said quietly but urgently, and when she looked in the direction of the voice, there was that little pot from earlier.

Drawn by the quiet voice, Snow White shakily picked up the bottle of mineral water that had been set down on the ground. She opened the lid of the pot and poured water inside. A muggy smell rose up all around, and at the same time the voice became quieter, and then vanished. Snow White squatted down on the spot—rather, she collapsed on the spot and put her hands together at the pot. She had to do it. Over and over again, she apologized—to who, she didn't even know.

Suddenly, Snow White heard the loud flapping of wings from outside, and she panicked and stood. Just like before she'd transformed into a magical girl, without looking back—the flapping sounds had come from the front, so she raced at full speed for the back entrance.

◇ Minael

A few days later, Ruler's fatigue, headache, and dizziness were completely gone, and she was angry just as usual. Tama was making a moderate amount of mistakes, and Swim Swim was sitting properly with her back straight. Minael hadn't thought that simply celebrating Ruler's birthday would fix everything, but it actually had, in a way. In other words, Top Speed must have been right. Minael and Yunael nodded at each other, agreeing that the placebo effect was indeed amazing.

"That takes care of one problem. Onto the next one."

"Karaoke practice, right? We'll beat Ruler this time for sure!"

Magical Girl vs. Shark

This story takes place shortly before the events of *Magical Girl Raising Project*.

Debut

TV anime *Magical Girl Raising Project*
Blu-ray/DVD special booklet 2

Magical Girl vs. Shark

◇ Magicaloid 44

A single unit—rather, a person in the shape of a robotic-type magical girl—stood on the roof of a multi-tenant building. She, Magicaloid 44, leaned out a bit to look down at the clock tower across from her. The giant clock, which functioned as both the clock shop's sign and a monument to the hundred-year anniversary since the shop's founding, popped open, and a number of figures leaped out from within. Moving as smoothly as living things, the figures blew on trumpets and banged on drums as they proceeded around the outer perimeter of the clock. Being that it was nighttime, they made no noise. After watching the figures finish their quiet march and return once more into the clock, Magicaloid looked down at her weapon rack.

Checking for her futuristic magic tool at midnight was Magicaloid's daily routine. Praying that she would get some dream item—like a pickax that turned wherever she dug into an oilfield or a pen that would turn whatever number she wrote in a bank deposit form into real money—she stuck her hand into her weapon rack. But her dreams had never come true before. Most of what she got, after thinking about how to use them, she'd concluded that she couldn't. For example, with the insect sex differentiation device and stuff like that, if not for Sister Nana, there never would have been an opportunity to make use of them.

Having never gotten a lucky draw before, she was up to her neck in a sarcastic sense of resignation. *I'm never gonna get a lucky draw anyway,* she thought, but she still couldn't abandon the hope that maybe the next one would be it. So that day, as always, she thrust her hand into her weapon rack. This had to be just like those people who got addicted to drops in gacha games. *But not knowing how many of my 444,444,444 items are hits has got to be some really* *illegal gacha,* she thought with a sigh as she pulled the item out. The day's magic item was a dark brown sphere bundled in plastic wrap. It was just a single item, about one inch in diameter. When she tried pressing on it with the pads of her fingers, it bounced back with a soft elasticity.

"Hmm, hmm…"

As for how to use the item—it came to her mind automatically the moment she pulled it out. This was a magic growth-accelerating treat for pets, and by giving it to one, you could make your beloved pet into a unique creature. Like a Caucasus beetle with a superalloy shell, a pygmy marmoset with intelligence like a human's, or a dachshund who would catch the smell of prey sixty-two miles away. It would strengthen the pet's abilities to the max and give it absolute love and loyalty to its owner.

"Hmm…"

Magicaloid had no home to call her own. In other words, she didn't have a pet. She believed pet ownership was a pastime allowed to those with disposable income and not the destitute. If someone had a pet, the odds that they were rich were fairly high, and they might buy this item for a fair price.

Magicaloid sent messages offering to make a deal with all the magical girls of N City, one after another: Calamity Mary, La Pucelle, Top Speed, Ripple, Ruler, the Peaky Angels, Sister Nana, Weiss Winterprison, Nemurin, Cranberry—but she didn't get a single favorable response. La Pucelle, Winterprison, Cranberry, Nemurin, Top Speed, and Ripple all bluntly refused because they didn't have pets. Ruler's reply—How outrageous can you be, trying to take advantage of my subordinates? If this continues any further, then I'm prepared to take legal action.—came with a frightening document that went on and on.

Calamity Mary and Sister Nana, strangely enough, asked Magicaloid the same question: "Can this be used on humans?" When Magicaloid answered that it couldn't, Mary gave a blunt reply: "Don't bother me with dumb shit. Get bent." Sister Nana said, "I don't have any pets," which had nothing to do with the question she'd asked, and that felt even more terrifying than Mary's response.

If you were talking magical girls, then the cliché was that they'd have a mascot character with them, but not a single one of them had a pet. Magicaloid placed her magical phone on the edge of the roof.

"Oh—could it be used on you, Fav?" Magicaloid wondered aloud.

The hologram floated up from her magical phone.

"You've got some nerve, treating a sentient digital life-form like Fav as a pet, pon," was all he said before vanishing. Magicaloid reached out to put her magical phone away, and when she did, the hologram popped up again.

"Selling to other magical girls is a gray area, pon. Don't forget how generous I'm being, pon. If you try to sell to ordinary people, I'll strip you of your magical girl status, so keep that in mind, pon."

"Speaking of selling to ordinary people, I believe there is this one person…"

"Who do you mean, pon? Fav hasn't gotten any reports about that, pon. If you're unhappy about something, why not tell that person directly, pon?"

"I am positive that you know about it."

"Have a nice day, pon."

Then the hologram really vanished.

Now that she had been told off like that, Magicaloid could not do business with ordinary pet lovers. But none of the magical girls had pets. And she clearly didn't have enough time to preach to someone about how great pets were and induce them to get one. Magicaloid's future items were disposable and only good for one day, so if she waffled on how to use them, thinking *not this* or *not that,* before she knew it, it would be time up and they'd be garbage. She had promoted this one as a very good deal, since once the item was used, the change it brought about in the animal that ate it was permanent, but nobody had bought it.

Magicaloid swiftly reconsidered and came up with a plan.

Lighting up her boosters, she launched herself off the roof, then landed near a midsize park away from the center of the city. After making sure that there was nobody around, she undid her transformation and returned to being Makoto Andou. The acquaintance she was after often spent his time near this park, but he moved around a lot to evade the authorities; this was not his permanent dwelling. Praying that he would be there that day, she went into the park and spent five minutes searching deep in the underbrush with only the lights of the streetlamps to guide her. She discovered a "dwelling" that made use of tree branches to conceal itself so exquisitely that it could never be identified from a distance.

She knocked on the door part of the basic fold-up house, which was made of a number of sturdy-looking cardboard boxes and blue plastic sheets. There was no reply, so she knocked even harder. When there was still no reply, she barged straight into the dwelling. A warmly dressed middle-aged man wrapped up in a blanket jerked into a sitting position, raising both hands in the darkness to guard his face.

"Wh-what is this, an old-man hunt?!"

"Naw, mister. It's me—look."

"Ohhh, Makoto? Why are you here? It's still dark out."

"You're the one who said that when you're fishing, you can get the most bites between night and morning."

"Sure, I did say that. But don't tell me you're going fishing now?"

"It's urgent. If all goes well, I'll make quite a lot of money. And if that happens, I'll give you a big share, too."

"Guess I got no choice, then."

The two of them divided the labor and folded up the folding house. The man put the dwelling on his back along with a backpack, and Makoto took a bucket and fishing rod in each hand as they trudged the thirty-five-minute walk to the port. They came out from a gap between warehouses to emerge in a lumberyard, then walked farther to pass behind a line of cars with numbers from outside the prefecture to emerge at the entrance of the harborside embankment where barbed wire kept intruders out—otherwise known as the inner bank.

The big NO TRESPASSING sign and the barbed wire were not enough to stop these two societal outsiders. Even with all they were carrying, they nimbly avoided the barbs and came down on top of the breakwater. Despite how strictly it prevented entry and the occasional watch that came around, the top of the breakwater was lined with avid anglers and fishing rods.

"Something that, like, makes a strong impression would be nice."

"A strong impression, huh? So a flounder or a black porgy… Nah, this time of year would be a fat greenling, I guess."

"I've never heard of that fish."

"You'll know it when you see it. The look on their faces leaves a real impression."

If she didn't have a pet, then she should just make one. With a crow or a sparrow, the odds were high that they would just eat it and run. With an insect, she couldn't really be sure if it would get attached to her. Stray dogs and cats weren't just walking around all over the place anymore these days, and it would be a real struggle to capture a wild tanuki or squirrel. She didn't like mice or cockroaches, and even if she went to the pound to get a cat, she doubted they would give a homeless person anything. And any pet that cost money was out of the question. Since she had no money.

But a fish, though—and she had an acquaintance who would catch one for her. She had seen videos of people giving koi fish treats to get them to do tricks, and if they were smart enough for that, then one should somehow work as a pet for her. She could either make it a spectacle to earn money or sell it to another magical girl as a mystery pet. Worst case, if it wouldn't work as a pet, she could eat it, at least. The magic power might make it more delicious than a regular fish.

She walked along the embankment for about ten minutes, picking up some of the dried-up scatter bait that the other fishermen had dropped along the way. Peeking into their coolers and buckets, it looked like some were getting bites and others were not. It didn't seem good or bad overall, but the man said "not bad," so it had to be okay. He came to a stop.

"Right here," he said.

He thrust his rod out in the gap between two people, and using the scatter bait they'd picked up, he caught a few small horse mackerel, all around two inches long. The fish were biting immediately whenever they cast, and they were able to nab enough that it was fun.

"Not what you're looking for, is it?" the man asked.

"Doesn't have a lot of impact."

They changed the rod and the tackle, and next they used the little horse mackerel that they'd caught as bait to go for something big.

"All good. I brought a knife and a cutting board so that we can prepare it right here."

"It's not for eating, though."

"Huh? Really?"

"Worst-case scenario, I will eat it, but that's purely a last resort. If possible, I'd like to use it for something else. That would make me

—and, by extension, you—happy.”

“I don’t really get it, but sure. I’ll get ya a big one.”

Makoto had gone fishing with him twice before. She had also borrowed a rod from him and cast it herself. But she’d just felt like this wasn’t her thing, since there was a lot of waiting time. Fisherman types would claim that “the time you spend sitting with your line cast isn’t waiting time,” but the way Makoto saw it, it was none other than wasted time. The waiting time was even longer than if you caught a cold and went to a doctor the morning after senior citizens got their pension payments. In a doctor’s office, waiting didn’t go on forever—but with fishing, you couldn’t be sure there was an end in sight. Sometimes, you just had to be like “No catch today,” with a wry smile as you carefully carried your empty fish basket back.

So Makoto didn’t fish. She would never do things that she didn’t want to do. She drew up some saltwater with a bucket that had a rope tied around it, then sat down on top of her backpack, leaving the rest to him.

“You came all this way, so you should fish, too,” the man said.

“I’m not into it.”

“Fishing is fun.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“The sea is incredible. No matter how we feel like we get it, we haven’t understood even a tenth of its shallows, never mind the depths. That’s why we come to the sea and battle with the fish.”

“Uh-huh, sure.”

The man thrust his rod in the gaps between the breakwater blocks on the embankment and let the fishing line dangle.

“Don’t fall,” said Makoto.

“I’m not gonna fall.”

Preparing for the long haul, Makoto opened up her phone and started reading a web novel. When killing time, a novel was better than manga, since it took time to read it. So now, if he could just catch something while her battery lasted—

“Got a bite!”

“Whoa, that was fast!”

The fish the man pulled off his tackle was just over twelve inches long, brown overall with a whitish belly, with a squashed face, as if it had been pressed from above, and a big mouth. It couldn’t be said to have great style.

"This is a fat greenling?" asked Makoto.

"Yep."

The man pulled the fish off the hook and dropped it into the bucket with a splash. It didn't swim around calmly, but sank quietly to the bottom and didn't really move much.

"Sure, it makes a strong impression, but it's also ugly," said Makoto.

"The uglier the fish, the better it tastes."

"Taste isn't really the point…but, oh well."

Makoto pulled the plastic pack out from her pocket and let the spherical treat inside drop into her palm. She shook the treat in her palm a few times, then let it plop into the bucket. The treat let out air bubbles as it sank to the bottom of the bucket, falling in front of the fat greenling's face—and then moving suddenly and startlingly fast, the fish swallowed the treat down in one gulp.

"What'd you give it?" the man asked Makoto.

"Some food. Hey, are you listening, fat greenling?" Makoto struck the side of the bucket and called out to the fish. "I'm your master. Swear loyalty to me. If you obey me, then I'll make sure you're well-fed. Hear that, ya dumb greenling?"

"Would a fat greenling understand human speech?" the man said, exasperated.

Not replying to him, Makoto smacked the side of the bucket again. "Hey, you listening?"

Musica

The fat greenling circled the bucket a couple of times, skimming along the bottom. It was clearly moving in a lively manner that was different from its sluggish swimming, before eating the treat. It seemed to have had an effect. Makoto leaned close to the water so she could talk to it again, and the greenling suddenly leaped up, striking her right in the forehead. She let out a brief shriek and landed on her bottom. The greenling, which had leaped in the opposite direction, jumped two or three times over the concrete before vanishing into the ocean, as if it was sucked into the gaps between the breakwater blocks.

"H-hey. You all right?" the man asked Makoto.

"Ah! Ngh, ahh…"

The pet was supposed to become even more loyal, but it seemed that the greenling had not recognized Makoto as its master.

"That…stupid greenling!"

No matter how mad she got, it wasn't bringing back the fish, and she had no way of chasing it, either. She doubted she could catch the escaped magic greenling. Makoto punched the embankment and cursed the fat greenling for eating and running on her.

◇◇◇

Nobody could have anticipated just how much effect Makoto's cursing had. The escaped fat greenling was unable to live happily and leave behind offspring. It triumphantly set out on its new fishy life as a magic fat greenling, but its inexhaustible supply of might and energy proved to be more than it could handle.

It went past the breakwater block area—its natural habitat—and into the harbor, rushing out into the distant open ocean. The greenling kept on swimming, tasting little fish it had never seen, riding ocean currents it had never been on, searching for seas where it could swim even more freely. But these unfamiliar places had predators beyond the greenling's wildest imagination.

It was swimming to its heart's content when it crashed into a massive creature and was sent flying—but this motivated the greenling to challenge the creature to a fight. It lost terribly and, unable to escape, was eaten.

Normally, the greenling never would have challenged an opponent a thousand times its own weight. It would have sensed their presence and simply fled. It was overconfident in the incredible might it had been so suddenly granted, and that false sense of invincibility led to its tragic end.

Just as Makoto had cursed the fat greenling, the greenling cursed Makoto. *If she hadn't done all that, then I'd never have gotten eaten,* it thought, understanding—with the intellect unbecoming of a fish—its new powers, who it was now, the enemy about to eat it, and the cause-and-effect relationships between them. It fervently cursed her before being swallowed whole.

The great white shark that ate the fat greenling was unbelievably satisfied from such small prey. An immense heat grew in its stomach as it swam off somewhere different from its usual habitat. Why it was heading there, the shark itself couldn't even understand. Being simply a fish, the shark had no way of knowing that it was being influenced by the curse of the fat greenling.

◇ Weiss Winterprison

There were a lot more magical girls in N City now, but there weren't enough of them to cover the whole area of the city. There were many spots in the city that were home to no one, and for those sorts of "non-magical girl areas," there was an unspoken understanding that the nearby magical girls would voluntarily do rounds there. But even so, a lot of the girls were like Calamity Mary or the Ruler team and would just stay at home, naturally shifting the burden to those who took their work seriously. For this sort of thing, Winterprison very much thought that they should make the burden fair by stipulating the rules in writing and rectifying things, but people like Sister Nana would gleefully do rounds of the nearby regions without complaint. While quietly burning with anger toward the selfish magical girls who took advantage of Sister Nana's kindness and generosity—thinking everything was fine so long as their own area was fine—Winterprison accompanied Sister Nana for a walk on the beach that day.

"It's gotten quite windy," Winterprison said.

She nonchalantly changed their positions, making it so that she was following Nana diagonally from behind, protecting her from the wind. That a magical girl was strong enough to ignore the wind and rain and that she had to protect Sister Nana from the wind and rain were two completely different things.

"There's no one around, huh?" said Sister Nana.

"It's late at night, after all," Winterprison replied.

"Tee-hee."

"Was something funny?"

"Oh, no. It's just that there is this old-fashioned trope about lovers coming to the beach at night."

"It's not old-fashioned. But the season being what it is…"

"It *is* still cold."

"I doubt it'll be a bother, in magical girl form …but things are about to heat up."

"What's the matter?"

"Oh, just thinking that I'm going to be working in this outfit, even in summer."

The two of them laughed together. The air remained peaceful as they walked along the beach, but privately, something was on Winterprison's mind. Standing by Nana's side in the winter, they were picturesque. But being like this in the summer—you really had to wonder about that. Only perverts or assassins would wear long coats. It would be inexcusable if her standing at Nana's side caused others to give Nana strange looks—but then, if she were to not stand at her side, she would die from loneliness.

Most magical girls did their work in outfits that would be cold in winter, so Winterprison assumed rationally that there wasn't any problem with wearing something too hot in the summer, but her feelings for Nana got in the way of that. Hiding her private worries in the peaceful atmosphere as they chatted, she caught some footsteps behind them and turned around.

"Oh…sorry. Am I bothering you?" said the newcomer.

"Ohhh, it's you, La Pucelle," said Winterprison.

The magical girl La Pucelle was Sister Nana's student, Winterprison's elder peer, so to speak. As La Pucelle bowed her head deeply, her tail moved upward in reaction. Her motif was that of a dragon knight, but her armor was far too skimpy for a knight, and she was extremely exposed below the waist in particular. She looked like she would be cold in the spring season, but La Pucelle was completely unbothered, jumping and leaping across the streets that had lingering snow dirtied black and gray.

Sister Nana smiled gently and waved her hand in front of her face. “Don’t worry about it. It’s not as if this is a private date. We were purely patrolling as magical girls,” she said, easygoing.

La Pucelle’s expression, on the other hand, was tense. “Patrolling… So you heard the rumor?”

“Rumor?”

“Oh, you didn’t know? Apparently, part of the outer bank was destroyed.”

“The outer bank? You mean the breakwater?”

Winterprison’s elegant eyebrows furrowed, and she stroked the area to massage away the wrinkle. She wanted to avoid scowling as much as possible when she was with Sister Nana.

“You mean it broke because of the ocean’s force?”

“Apparently, it wasn’t that sort of break. More like it was demolished.”

La Pucelle looked toward the ocean, drawing Winterprison to look there was well. The outer bank—the outer breakwater that protected the whole harbor—wasn’t like the inner bank. It was an independent structure built in the ocean, so you couldn’t walk to it. To destroy it, you’d have to either swim through the cold spring ocean to get there or use a boat.

“I hear a contractor is coming tomorrow to start repairs,” said La Pucelle.

“Hmm… I wonder why something like that happened?” said Winterprison.

“There have been a lot of rumors going around. The more realistic ones say that a suspicious foreign boat caused an explosion, then fled. They’re also saying a UFO showed up and shot it with a beam weapon, or a giant creature body-slammed it.”

“A giant creature? Like a whale?”

“I’ve never heard of any whales appearing around here.” Sister Nana cocked her head a tad, then added, “That reminds me, I heard sharks used to show up in this area long ago.”

“Sharks…?”

Winterprison pictured a giant man-eating shark—then thinking it’d be scary if it was a bit bigger, that image was replaced with one a size larger.

It wasn’t that she liked sharks. She liked zombies and monster movies. The first time she had invited Nana on a date, they had gone to see a zombie movie. When Winterprison had asked about it afterward, Nana had expressed unhappily, "I'm very sorry, but I couldn't say what about it was interesting," and so Winterprison learned that they had very different tastes in movies. So Winterprison had moved away from zombies and monster movies and started watching movies about love and romance, which Nana liked. She was okay with this, since it wasn't like she needed to see horror so badly that she would make things unpleasant for Nana, but sometimes, she would think back on it.

Winterprison shook off her idle thoughts. "It's unlikely that just a biggish shark could destroy the breakwater."

"I doubt it was shark," La Pucelle replied.

"What do you think it is, La Pucelle?"

"What I'm most worried about, and what also seems the most likely to me is…a magical girl."

"Ahh…"

"I see. You're right, a magical girl could destroy the breakwater."

La Pucelle had said "magical girl," which was fairly nonspecific, but it was clear that she was referring to someone in particular. Winterprison recalled just two weeks back, when she had fought Calamity Mary in the Kounan district. Since her highest priority had been Sister Nana's safety, she'd focused on defense the whole time, fighting while running away, until both of them had successfully escaped. But even calling that a success had left Winterprison with feelings of shame. She wondered if she should have beaten down her opponent completely then, and her regrets about it lingered. Mary would certainly regret letting her prey get away, too, and those feelings might well pose danger to Sister Nana at any time. Sister Nana was Sister Nana, and despite how Winterprison told her to cut it out, she had declared in the chat that Winterprison had driven off Calamity Mary like she was some hero. If Mary were to hear about that, she was bound to interpret it as provocation.

Once Winterprison considered that it might be Mary, she started thinking it was definitely Mary; but then she realized, *if Mary wanted to do something, wouldn't it be strange for her to destroy the Kubegahama breakwater?* Kubegahama wasn't Sister Nana's home turf. Destructive behavior there wouldn't be a declaration of war against her. Was Mary testing out some new weapon? Even then, would she do it out at the outer bank, where she would have to either swim or use a boat to get there?

Winterprison cracked her neck. "It would be strange for it to be a magical girl, too."

"You think?" La Pucelle asked.

"Maybe a fishing boat or trawler or something hit it by accident and ran off."

"Well, whatever it is, I'm thinking I should check first." La Pucelle then bowed her head and said, "See you" before running off toward the harbor.

Winterprison and Sister Nana nodded and ran after her, quickly catching up.

"We'll go with you," said Winterprison.

La Pucelle looked a little surprised. "Thank you very much. But you don't mind?"

"What do you mean?"

"Um…isn't this interrupting your date?"

"You don't have to worry about that."

"Ohhh, okay. Sorry."

"What are you two talking about?" Sister Nana cut in.

"Ah, it's nothing important," Winterprison told her.

La Pucelle, one of Sister Nana's prized students, wasn't a bad girl. But sometimes she could read too much into things.

Besides, all this about a date or whatnot aside, something was bothering Winterprison.

The three magical girls avoided any fishermen by running atop warehouses and behind shipping containers to come to a stop at the entrance to the inner bank, in front of the barbed wire and big iron gate. It was sealed with a sturdy-looking lock.

"Normally, the inner bank is full of fishermen, but…" With an eye to their surroundings, La Pucelle leaped on top of the gates. "Since the outer bank was destroyed, there's apparently been a patrol coming around every hour. There's nobody going in or out."

La Pucelle extended her hand from above, but Winterprison held out a palm and refused the aid, taking Nana in her arms and leaping over the gate to land soundlessly on the other side. La Pucelle crooked her right index finger like a claw and scratched her head, then cleared her throat quietly before leaping down from the gate and running off. Winterprison and Sister Nana ran after her, and in ten seconds, they reached the edge of the inner bank. From there they could see the outer bank over fifty-five yards ahead across the water. Even for a magical girl, it was too far to jump across.

"Um…will you be okay?" La Pucelle asked. "It's pretty far away."

"It's no problem," Winterprison replied.

"I see. Then I'll go first."

La Pucelle held her sword up and leaped into the sea. Before their eyes, the sword grew larger and longer. In midair, she swung down the massive blade, then leaped again like she was doing a pole vault. She shrank her sword small enough to fit in the palm of her hand and landed on the edge of the outer bank.

Winterprison used the inner bank to make a wall. As her wall rose up from it, she made another wall, and then again and again she extended her walls vertically. Eventually, the wall couldn't take it and fell toward the outer bank. Winterprison took Sister Nana in her arms and raced and leaped over the collapsing wall, landing on top of the outer bank. Behind her, the wall crumbled to pieces, sending up pillars of water as it fell into the brine. Since the walls would vanish once her magic was undone and be no more, it wouldn't harm the environment.

"Well then, before the patrol comes…," Winterprison said.

"Yeah."

Winterprison lowered Nana to the ground and set off running. She *had* considered that if she was going to scoop up Nana at every occasion, then why not just run holding her in her arms from the start, but Nana surely wouldn't be into that. Winterprison had only just been getting a little understanding lately of what Nana preferred. If she could deepen her understanding further, then nothing would be better.

The outer bank was only about half the length of the inner bank. They reached the spot in question in under five seconds. It went without saying, but it had been so badly wrecked that it was obvious at a glance, and nobody seeing it would think that it had been worn down by the waves.

"Wow…"

"How…terrible."

The breakwater blocks had been shattered, and about fifteen feet worth of the upper part of the breakwater had been shaved off. Waves were beating against the broken section, soaking everything. The shattered fragments were scattered, and some of the pieces from the wreck were as large as a human torso. This had definitely not been caused by a boat collision.

Winterprison squatted down and picked up one of the fist-sized fragments that looked like it had been a part of the breakwater. Stroking it, she found its texture was rough. It dirtied her glove with gray powder. The surface of the fragment had been shaved by something like a file.

"Oh!" La Pucelle called out. She had gone down to the caved-in, destroyed section. "It's here, look."

Winterprison leaned out from above and looked down. There was something like a blade stuck in the spot where La Pucelle was pointing, on the wrecked area of the destroyed breakwater. Even a magical girl like La Pucelle couldn't quite move it, and she only finally got it out by rocking it side to side two or three times. It was just over eight inches long, flashing brightly under the light of the moon. It was too rounded to be a blade; it looked like a stone that had been ground down and finished with a metal polishing cloth.

"Whatever could this be?" La Pucelle wondered.

Sister Nana trembled, then muttered quietly, "This rather looks like…a fang."

Now that she mentioned it, it did kind of look like a fang, but it was too big for that. Winterprison doubted that even an orca or a swordfish would have teeth this big. "This seems more like a—"

She heard splashing sounds, followed by shrieks. Winterprison looked to the ocean to see a fishing boat rocking there. It was swaying wildly right and left, as if it had set off into the middle of a storm, and men clung to the railing of the boat to keep from falling off.

The ocean was calm. The waves were small. But the boat was listing so far, it was about to capsize. At this rate, several people could fall overboard. Winterprison lightly balled her right fist and thrust her left arm in front of Sister Nana, placing her behind her. A sort of shudder ran down her spine from top to bottom. Something incredible was happening. Even knowing that she had to hurry to go save them, something other than logic was keeping Winterprison's feet glued to the spot.

La Pucelle was about to leap into the ocean, saying "I'm going to go save them," but before Winterprison could stop her, the surface of the water rose up in a wash of white. There was the sound of water crashing as the wave slammed back down. Sister

Nana in her arms, Winterprison rolled to the side, and by the time she looked back, La Pucelle was gone.

The boat gradually steadied, and the men were pointing around them and yelling. When Sister Nana tried to speak, Winterprison put her index finger to her soft lips. Still holding Sister Nana in her arms, in a low stance like she was crawling on the breakwater, she looked around the area. The waves were coming high out of the water. Part of the broken section of the breakwater crumbled off, leaving ripples and white bubbles in the water.

Winterprison sniffed. What she smelled wasn't fishy so much as beast-like.

Bubbles rose to the water's surface, increasing in number and size. As the surface of the water rose, a staff-shaped something thrust its face out, still covered in water, only to immediately sink and vanish. The sounds and bubbles disappeared from the water's surface once more, making just quiet waves. That "staff-shaped something" had been the handle of La Pucelle's sword. She was fighting something under the water. Was there really a creature that could fight with a magical girl? Even if her opponent had the advantage of being in its territory, the physical abilities of a magical girl were absolute.

Winterprison slowly and reluctantly brought her finger away from Sister Nana's lips. She brought her own mouth close to Sister Nana's ear to whisper in a dry, hoarse voice, "I'm going into the water. You go someplace safe."

Sister Nana's expression contorted in surprise. Winterprison didn't wait for a reply, and when Sister Nana tried to stop her, she pushed her aside and leaped into the ocean. The cold stung her skin, but it wasn't so bad that she couldn't take it. Magical girls were robust enough to withstand the cold ocean of spring that refused human swimmers, and were able to swim while clothed.

The bubbles surrounding her thinned out. In the ocean at night, with only the moon for light, being a magical girl enabled her to see somewhat underwater. Winterprison scowled, but not because the salty ocean water stung her eyes. Mud swirled close to the ocean floor, blocking her vision. She got occasional glimpses of La Pucelle and something so massive, it couldn't be hidden, rampaging around—it was a shark.

She wanted to doubt her eyes, but it was definitely a shark. It was twenty feet long, with a large dorsal fin, and its mouth was so wide that it provided the illusion that the teeth themselves were moving. Its shape was so extreme, it was like someone had made a caricature of a shark and then emphasized the shark characteristics of people's imaginations even further.

La Pucelle had enlarged her wide sword to double her height to use it as a shield and was somehow keeping away from the shark's teeth, but it seemed like the most she could do just to stay out of the teeth's reach. One of her breastplate straps was torn off, and her armor was dented in, with one part broken or damaged like it had been filed off. Her hair was frayed and in disarray, and the exposed areas of her arms and legs were all oozing blood, coloring her white skin red.

Winterprison pointed her legs to the sky, jetting downward with a single kick. Making to attack the shark from above, she hastily avoided its tail as it swung at her without looking. Being underwater, she couldn't move around like she typically did, and she wound up guarding with her arms. It was powerful enough that it shook her to her core. Winterprison looked at her arms, after blocking the tail. Her coat was ripped, and she was bleeding. Her sturdy magical-girl costume had been torn up in that one attack, and her body was injured, too.

Winterprison backed off and tried to attack from behind again, but the shark swung its tail and whipped up mud from the ocean bottom. In attempt to get out of range of the mud, Winterprison tried to back off while circling to the right, drawing back her legs to wind up to leap off a rock—but right then! The shark suddenly appeared from the mud to charge forward, making Winterprison change the direction of her leap ninety degrees to evade, bounding a second time off the shark's side to spin around in the water. The shark came back with an instant U-turn. It was frighteningly fast. Even taking away the fact that they were in the water, it was abnormal. Winterprison leaped off another rock, lowering her right leg to the ocean floor for a dodge. Feeling a dull pain, she scowled. Her leg was bleeding into the water around her. That was the leg that she'd just used to jump off the shark. Though she was surprised how the shark's skin had shaved off her boot just from touching it, she didn't stop moving. The shark sped up. Winterprison put up a wall between herself and the shark. The shark slammed its head into the wall, destroying it in a single blow, but Winterprison had anticipated that. Her magic wall made the shark falter in its body slam just slightly as she leaped to evade it, raising a wall under her feet and then bounding off that to escape from the follow-up attacks from its tail and fins.

The shark stopped attacking, twisting its massive body as it rose to the surface. A beat later, the long sword extended from the mud, but it didn't reach the shark.

The way the shark rose to the surface, she could only assume that it had anticipated La Pucelle's attack from the mud.

Winterprison had learned a number of facts about sharks from movies, and this was one of them. The creatures known as sharks had special sensory organs that could sense weak electric currents in the water. They could use these to get an accurate grasp of their prey's position, even in the deep sea where light didn't reach—or in roiling mud. That meant in muddy waters, their enemy would know their position, while they didn't know the enemy's.

With a beat of its tail and fins, the shark dived downward, and Winterprison evaded it. The shark turned its massive frame at the last moment, skimming the sea floor, sweeping up mud in its wake to block their vision. It planned to blind them so it could toy with them without them fighting back.

As La Pucelle floated up in the mud, Winterprison gave her a sign—pointing her fingers upward, thrusting up twice. La Pucelle seemed to get what she meant, as she nodded back, then thrust her long sword into the ocean floor and extended it in a burst. The long sword pushed La Pucelle upward as it grew, and she rose to the surface of the water.

Winterprison created a wall under her feet, making another wall from that wall, and another and another to connect the walls upward, her face emerging from the water's surface to take a deep breath. She was so grateful for the long-awaited oxygen, her eyes watered.

Winterprison extended her wall by one more layer to escape from the water, and with a single leap, she returned to the breakwater. Fortunately, there was no follow-up attack from the shark. It seemed the fishing boat had fled, and it was just waves around her—all she could see was the usual ocean, where she would never expect a giant monster to be.

"Are you all right, Winterprison?" asked La Pucelle.

"Yes, I'm fine. I'm more worried about you. It seems it got you quite badly."

"No, I'm okay…"

"What's wrong? Why are you backing away?"

"Oh, um…your coat's been ripped quite a lot, and, um, you're exposed."

"Ah, true, it is in the way."

Winterprison took off her torn coat. She noticed that the sweater she wore underneath also had large rips in it, and with quite a bit of skin visible. Winterprison practically tore that off as well. La Pucelle turned her face away and took another step back.

"Ah, what's the matter?" asked Winterprison.

"Um…don't mind me."

Seawater splashed up. A powerful shiver spread from Winterprison's back through her whole body. It wasn't simply because she had taken off her costume.

The shark was there. Right in the middle of the black ocean, she could see its giant dorsal fin. The shark's dorsal fin had not come up on the outside of the breakwater. It was on the inside—in other words, in the harbor.

"No way!" La Pucelle cried.

The shark ignored her sorrowful cry, making its way toward the harbor. Its dorsal fin swaying back and forth like it was showing it off, it swam off far more slowly and boldly, compared to the way it had been moving underwater. Maybe it actually was showing off for them. She felt like she could hear the shark saying, "I don't want you guys following me."

"Ridiculous," Winterprison muttered, rejecting her own fantasy. She doubted that even a dolphin or an orca could sense things about a magical girl and human society—that they were thinking, *I don't want it attacking the harbor and the ordinary people there.* No fish had that kind of intellect—or it shouldn't—but for some reason, it was heading toward the harbor.

The two magical girls raced out. They'd used the same method they had to come to return to the inner bank, running into the harbor, when an impact came up from the ground to heavily resound inside them. The shaking quickly stopped, then was followed by a second shaking, even bigger than the first. It wasn't an earthquake. The giant unloading crane that was installed in the harbor fell into the ocean, throwing up a spray of water that could be seen from a distance as it collapsed. The shark attacked the base of the crane one more time to shave it off, and when the crane toppled into the water, it bit it, crunching the steel frame.

The shark leaped out of the water as if it were mocking them, and the ground shook three or four more times. Winterprison jumped over a shipping container, beelining it for the place where the crane had been. Passing by people who fled with sheet-white faces, she bounded from an empty truck to the roof of a warehouse, getting a run-up on the roof before using all her strength to leap. Fragments of concrete pattered down along with salty water.

Before her eyes, the harbor was being shaved away. Biting, striking with its tail and fins, and body-slamming, the monster shark expanded its territory, continuing its casual destruction like it was tearing up paper.

“Just what on earth is this? Is this really a shark?!” La Pucelle cried.

“It is. This is my first time fighting one as well, but I know that it’s an extremely powerful creature,” said Winterprison.

“I never thought they were this strong…”

“Watch out. There was an even stronger one in a movie.”

“Huh? A movie?”

“Let’s go!”

Winterprison leaped into the ocean without hesitation, and La Pucelle followed.

Fragments of concrete and the crane wreckage were sinking here and there. The shark wove between these obstacles, accelerating toward Winterprison and La Pucelle. As it swam, Winterprison generated a wall from one of the sinking concrete fragments. The wall struck the shark in its side, and when it flinched, La Pucelle sliced at it. The shark twisted around swiftly, just barely avoiding the swing from the sword, but the sword extended right at the last second. Cut in the back by the extended sword, the shark seemed to flail in pain, swinging its tail wildly and opening its mouth. It seemed to be showing off its teeth. Did it mean to counterattack with those? Then the shark suddenly pursed its lips and spewed out a black liquid.

It’s spitting ink…? Absurd!

La Pucelle hadn’t been anticipating projectile weapons at all, and it sprayed all over her, surrounding her with blinding blackness.

Winterprison avoided getting hit, bouncing off a wall to get out of range of the ink and rising to the surface. But the ink was spreading incredibly rapidly. The shark must have been spitting ink continuously, as the spot dyed all black got bigger and bigger, reaching as far as Winterprison's feet, but she kicked at the water, jetting away.

As she swam desperately, aiming for the water's surface, she sensed something approaching her from behind. She could never beat a shark's speed underwater. She quickly gave up on getting away, turning around to fight back—but right when she got herself ready, the shark passed by close at Winterprison's side. Wondering just what it was trying to do, she turned around to see where the shark was headed, and there was Sister Nana. She had been worried about Winterprison, who had leaped into the ocean and out of range of her magic, and was peeking off the end of the breakwater and into the ocean. The shark was heading straight for her.

Winterprison blanched. Kicking in a rush at the water, she pursued the shark, but it got farther and farther away.

"Sister Nana!"

She had to stop the shark, even if it meant her life—so she was thinking when something bumped into her back. Surprised, Winterprison turned around. It was La Pucelle. She was standing on the hilt of her sword as she continuously extended the blade even faster than the shark was swimming. La Pucelle gave Winterprison her shoulder, supporting her. They were bearing closer and closer to the shark. The despair that had filled Winterprison turned into burning hot rage. With a heat that burned everything from the inside out, its flames licked at the subject of her anger: the shark.

The shark must have realized that they would catch up before it reached the surface, as it turned itself around. As La Pucelle and Winterprison drew near, it opened its big mouth, and all three parties collided. La Pucelle was flung away, but she kept her attention on her sword, continuing to extend it. Winterprison barely managed to withstand the impact but got bit on the shoulder with its giant jaws as she grabbed its fin and gills at the same time. Using the sword's hilt as her footing, she grappled with the shark close and face-to-face. Her gloves tore, the shark's skin scraping her palms and finger pads, sanding them down to the flesh. She could hear the sound of her bones creaking from her bitten shoulder. She was bleeding a lot—a normal person would have died of blood loss by this point.

But as Winterprison was pitting her strength against the shark's, the sword continued to grow. When the surface of the water grew close, Winterprison's body brimmed with strength. Sister Nana's magic had reached her. Flung straight into the air, Winterprison roared, flinging the giant shark into the air. When she threw it, it scraped off the flesh of her shoulder, but with Sister Nana's divine protection, these wounds were nothing. While spitting mixed blood and seawater from her mouth, Winterprison landed, and a beat later, the shark fell—or so she thought.

Looking up into the sky, Winterprison pressed at her shoulder and sank to her knees. She was witnessing an unbelievable sight. Sister Nana, who was offering prayers atop the breakwater, and La Pucelle, who had come up on land at some point, were both dumbly looking up at *it*.

The shark was flapping its large white wings as it flew through the air. Opening its mouth, it showed off its rows of teeth. It looked as if it were laughing. A white bird that was caught at the edge of its teeth—most likely a gull—was swallowed with a slurp.

In the water, the shark had spewed ink. Could it be that it'd gained the abilities of whatever it had eaten? Winterprison had assumed that the many incredible sharks she'd seen in movies were nothing but fiction, but if magical girls were real, then it wasn't odd for there to be magic sharks, too.

The sight was unreal, frightening and somehow sublime. As she bore witness to this, shivers rose through Winterprison's whole body as fear spread through her. The shivers even reached her fingertips, but it all went away when the shark took a sudden dive for Sister Nana. Winterprison jumped sideways to grab Sister Nana into her arms, rolling to evade the shark. Having missed its prey, the shark flew up into the sky again, then looked down on the ground to confirm its next target. Next, the shark attacked La Pucelle—though La Pucelle blocked the teeth with her sword, the impact sent her flying, and she crashed into the truck that was lying on its side nearby. The shark flew up in the air for a third time.

What was needed when fighting a shark was courage. In movies, wild plot twists and surprise weapons often defeated sharks, but well, it was generally fair to say that courage was needed. Winterprison released Sister Nana, then leaped into the shark's line of sight to get its attention on her.

The shark attacked from the sky above. Winterprison rolled on the ground as she dodged it, then raced up what barely remained of the crane to secure herself a position higher than the shark, and right before the shark could fly up again, she leaped down to its back.

Even if it had wings, the shark wasn't moving as freely as it had in the water. Winterprison threw herself into a flying kick, aiming for the shark's undefended back, but—

"It can't be!"

The giant crab's claw that grew from the shark's torso caught Winterprison's leg. Agony shot from Winterprison's leg, making her clench her teeth. She wouldn't be dominated by pain. Strength was continuing to well within her. Sister Nana was giving her strength once more.

Winterprison twisted her body with all her strength, wrenching the claw pincer around. The carapace made a nasty creaking sound, and the shark lost its balance in midair, swaying. Taking this as her chance, Winterprison kicked at the pincer, and when its grasp relaxed, she kicked it away one more time, escaping from its restraints. Leaping to the shark's back, she held down the seagull wings as they flapped around. The shark lost control in midair and spiraled downward, its landing making the ground shudder and opening cracks in the concrete before it bounced. Winterprison withstood the pain and shock of impact, then circled in front of the shark's face where it lay on the ground.

Seeing Winterprison coming in front of it, the shark opened its mouth in a threatening manner—no, it wasn't a threat. Something white, red, long, and thin leaped out from its mouth and wrapped itself around Winterprison's body. She whacked it with the back of her hand in an attempt to smack it away, but it stuck to her in a gooey mess and wouldn't come off. Then it slid around her body, binding her tight. It was the tentacle of an octopus or a squid.

"But…it's…too late!"

Winterprison created a wall in between herself and the shark. The magical concrete wall ripped off a number of the tentacles as it thrust up to cut off Winterprison from the shark's mouth. Furthermore, perpendicular to the first wall, she created another wall that went toward the shark's mouth. A wall that was twelve inches thick and three feet wide smacked its giant jaw, and the raging shark bit into it, holding it in its mouth. It didn't realize that was exactly what Winterprison wanted.

She extended a new wall out from the top of the wall in its mouth—then another wall, and another, and another. She made more walls inside its mouth and extended them, and the walls that explosively grew inside its mouth assaulted the shark's body from the inside. The shark writhed and spurted blood, but its movements were already being limited. Cracks ran along its body, and buckets of blood gushed from them.

"It's over."

The walls spread in a radial pattern, tearing up the shark from the inside. Teeth flew, bones flew, organs flew, and the giant shark was divided into parts that scattered all over, while the walls, having lost their support, collapsed simultaneously.

Winterprison staggered and was on the verge of collapsing when she was supported from behind.

"Ah, you're covered in so much blood," said Nana.

"This is nothing; protecting you was worth it."

Winterprison kissed Nana's forehead, and Sister Nana embraced Winterprison—then let out a shriek. Winterprison turned around, eyes widening in shock.

The shark's body had burst open from the inside, its head, body, and insides scattering everywhere. But, in spite of that, countless tiny crab-like legs had grown from the biggest part, the head part, and it had started moving toward the ocean. It was still alive? Or was it about to revive? Winterprison tried to chase after the broken remains of the shark, but her legs got tangled, and she fell to her knees.

Minor pain continually ran through her right knee, left side, and left upper arm. The tentacles she thought she'd ripped off her were squirming. They now had a striped pattern in a variety of colors—blue, white, black, light brown—biting into her with little teeth. Winterprison's head instantly sagged.

A sea snake…! So it can change its separated body parts, too!

Swaying on her feet, she laid her hands on her knees. Many types of sea snake were poisonous. Poison shouldn't work on magical girls, but up against this shark, how far would "because I'm a magical girl" or whatever work? She couldn't think straight or focus. This wasn't the time to be pondering this.

At this point, she couldn't even stand without borrowing strength from Sister Nana. The many-legged shark head hopped off and landed in the water, wildly spawning ten-odd flippers to rapidly zoom away from land.

Winterprison was losing consciousness, but she desperately clung to what little of it remained. They had to defeat it now, or the next time they encountered it, they might well not be able to win. And if that happened, it would be innocent citizens getting hurt—

and Nana could well be among them. Clenching her teeth and swallowing blood, she took a step forward.

Suddenly, a shadow fell over them. Winterprison looked up and swallowed. La Pucelle, holding up a giant sword over thirty-three feet, was flying through the air. Sister Nana prayed to La Pucelle, and the sword she held overhead grew so long and big, no one would normally ever be able to carry it—thirty feet, sixty feet, ninety feet. Now this was long enough to reach the shark with its slice.

The shark already looked small in the distance as La Pucelle swung the giant sword down on it, and watching her, Winterprison felt relieved, but also mildly jealous. She visibly pouted.

◇ La Pucelle

The day after the shark fiasco, Winterprison summoned La Pucelle. La Pucelle had been contacted by Sister Nana pretty frequently before, but it was unusual for an invitation to come from Winterprison. And what's more, she'd said she wanted to meet without Sister Nana there. Was there something up? Had some new problem occurred? Or, having seen La Pucelle fight so well to get rid of the shark, did she want her to be her new partner…? Nah, Winterprison would never.

In the end, La Pucelle never did figure out what this was about before arriving at the abandoned supermarket where they were to meet—but there was Winterprison, with two slips of paper in her fingers.

"I invited Sister Nana, though I knew she would say no. She doesn't like the scary ones," Winterprison said as she showed La Pucelle some movie tickets. Printed on it was the title *Rocket Shark vs. Bullet Shark,* with a photo of two giant sharks colliding. "How about it? Do you want to go with me?"

"Huh? Uh, but—"

"Fav said he managed to hush up the incident decently enough, but it's not as if what actually happened has never been. Yes, it really did happen. Don't you think that's amazing? The sharks that I assumed existed only in fiction were actually real."

"Uh, I think sharks were real to begin with, though."

"I see… I didn't know. I assumed that everything in monster movies, be they A, B, C, or Z-movies, were all fiction.” Winterprison made a fist, held it up, and swung it down. She was clearly too worked up. It seemed like she hadn’t noticed that they were not really on the same page.

“Please calm down a little. That’s not what I’m trying to get at.”

“La Pucelle. If you knew that sharks were real, then you must be quite a monster fanatic, too.”

“M-monster fanatic?!”

“With a monster friend like you, then it will be easy to prepare for another monster appearing in N City in the future.”

“‘Monster friend’… That kind of sounds like ‘monster-in-law’…”

“Having faced a shark with me, you’ll understand. We must know more about sharks. That’s what this movie is for.”

“H-huh? But are we going to go now? I really can’t, dressed like this.”

“I figure we can just de-transform.”

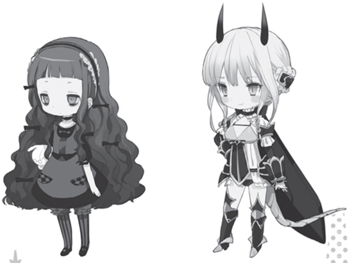
“W-wait, no, I can’t do that. That’s bad.”

“Then just put on a coat. Come on, let’s go, hurry.”

“Hey, hold on a minute—ah, um, hey, hey, don’t… Someone, help!”

The Magical Girl in Black and the Lady Knight

This story takes place shortly before the *Magical Girl Raising Project* game begins.



Debut

TV anime *Magical Girl Raising Project*
Blu-ray/DVD special booklet 3

The Magical Girl in Black and the Lady Knight

◇ La Pucelle

"Huh? Camping? In this season?" said Snow White.

"Camping isn't only for summer," La Pucelle replied.

The two magical girls facing each other atop the steel tower wore contrasting expressions: Snow White looked uneasy, while La Pucelle responded with a confident smile. She was purposely trying to appear confident: She'd been looking forward to the soccer club's camping trip but was fairly worried about leaving Snow White behind to do magical girl work alone. However, displaying that worry would probably make Snow White feel even more abandoned.

"It'll be all right. No need for concern," La Pucelle told her.

"…Do you think?"

Classic overthinking, La Pucelle figured. She wasn't even going to ask Sister Nana for advice about this. If she did that, she'd just be laughed at or teased—although Sister Nana might actually listen in earnest. But La Pucelle was still embarrassed.

"I know you can be a great magical girl on your own, too, Snow White."

"Huh?"

"Hmm?"

They now stared at each other, equally baffled.

"What do you mean?"

"What do *you* mean? Huh?"

"I was worried that you might get into some trouble or something while you were on your trip, Sou."

"Huh? Really? I thought we were talking about how you would feel lonely on your own…"

The two of them looked at each other for a while before simultaneously bursting into laughter. La Pucelle was cracking up so hard that she forgot to tell Snow White to stop calling her Sou. Though they both loved magical girls, they were dissimilar in a lot of ways—but it was funny that somehow or other, they'd both been worried about the same thing.

◇ Hardgore Alice

Late at night on the third day after the game began, Ako Hatoda became a magical girl.

She just about jumped up on the spot, but before she could actually do it, she remembered she was in her room. Jumping, leaping, and making noise would bother her aunt and uncle downstairs. Now in magical girl form, Ako opened the door and sneaked outside, stepping down on the street in front of her house. She raised her right arm up high, and when she leaped up as hard as she could, she jumped high enough to shock herself. Before she knew it, she was looking down on the roof of the second story. She sighed in relief that she hadn't jumped up while inside, but doing it in a weird position made her lose her balance. She fell onto her shoulder on the asphalt, hitting her whole body hard.

The impact would have been enough to instantly kill a normal human, but she hardly felt a thing. Even greater was the sense of euphoria and accomplishment. She wasn't even listening to the mascot character Fav that had showed up to explain things, and an hour later, once her excitement had finally settled down, she summoned him again. "I wasn't listening before," she told him and asked him to explain once more. The mascot didn't try to hide his sour mood, but he did more or less explain various things about magical girls.

Saving people in trouble without seeking recompense, solving minor daily problems—Ako was very satisfied to hear that it was exactly like she'd imagined and hoped magical girls were.

She had become a magical girl—the magical girl Hardgore Alice.

Being saved by that magical girl in white had led to Ako becoming a magical girl herself. Just thinking about how she could work side by side with her as a fellow magical girl made her heart leap and her lips break into a smile. If she could get a "Thanks" and a smile for supporting the magical girl in white, that alone would put her on cloud nine.

"What's with that creepy wiggle, pon?"

"Creepy…?"

"You were moving kinda awkwardly."

Her joy must have been showing. Clearing her throat quietly, Alice straightened her back. She was only at the starting line of magical-girl-hood, not the finish. She had to get herself focused, or she might fail to keep up. Then she'd never get to be by the magical girl in white's side.

"But it's strange, pon. If you admired the magical girl in white, then shouldn't you have made your own design white, pon? White and black are total opposites, pon."

"If we're together…then the black-and-white contrast is pretty…"

"Huh? Really, pon? Is that combo pretty, pon? Aw, if you compliment Fav like that, Fav'll get all shy, pon."

Alice decided to not talk to this mascot character so long as it wasn't necessary.

Alice had been religiously checking the magical girl sightings info aggregate site for anything about the magical girl in white. Some of that could be groundless rumors and empty talk, but Alice still had a vague understanding of what she did. After all, Alice—that is, Ako herself—had been saved by the magical girl in white. Alice's goal was to help people by that magical girl's side. So of course, her own work would bring her closer to the magical girl in white.

Over the next four days, Alice raced around the town of Kobiki at night to help people. When she tried to run along power lines, she got shocked. She missed her landing trying to leap from one roof to another. While running along the side of the road, she stepped through a grating and fell into the gutter. That was how she learned the ways her body worked.

Through her many failures, she was able to get a decent grip on the superior physical capabilities of a magical girl, but she was completely lacking where it counted: helping people. There weren't a lot of people around this area of N City to begin with, and just running around, it wasn't like she was going to conveniently run into people seeking help one after another. Maybe it would be easier for her to run into trouble if she went outside her assigned area, but Fav had forbidden that: "It's still kind of like a probation period, pon. It's too early for you to make contact with other magical girls, pon. Going outside your area comes once you can do your job properly as a magical girl, pon." So she'd just use her legs to run around and search for people in trouble, learn the skills to solve issues, and become a magical girl worthy of standing at the white magical girl's side. Even if her opportunities were few, that didn't mean there were none at all.

So for three days after that, she tirelessly prowled Kobiki late at night, and finally she found her first person in trouble. Hardgore Alice's momentous first was someone who was pushing their bicycle to try to get it under a streetlamp. Had they popped a tire or had the chain come off? One story about the white magical girl she'd seen on the message boards had been a wonderful episode that described her getting her pure white costume all blackened and dirty fixing someone's bicycle. This was such an ideal situation, Alice's heart leaped and fluttered, and she ran in at full speed. She wasn't even thinking about the fact that she didn't have the tools, knowledge, or technique to fix a flat tire, let alone a chain.

Since she was in such a hurry, she got herself worked up and forgot that she was in a back alley late at night with bad visibility. As she hadn't paid attention to how narrow the lane was, she hit her shoulder on the wall of a ruined factory and staged an exceptionally impactful entrance scene: She showed up breaking a block wall with a shoulder tackle, leaving the person she was supposed to save with wide eyes and gaping mouth before they practically fell over themselves running away. Alice was unable to pursue them, with just her right hand thrust out halfway in front of her as she watched this person in need go.

For her second case, she caught sight of an old lady tottering along with a large wrapped bundle over her back. When Alice touched the bundle to carry it for her, the lady yelled "Police!" and ran away. Alice carefully considered why the old lady had yelled that when Alice didn't look anything like a police officer, and it was the next morning when she realized that the lady had interpreted her silently touching her bundle as a robber and had called for the cops.

The third case went like this: Alice caught sight of someone walking around who looked kind of like they were in trouble, but even after watching them for a while, she couldn't tell what their problem was. They looked like they were in trouble, but maybe they weren't actually. But it would be rude to go up and say to them, "Aren't you in trouble?" But then what if they really were in trouble? As she was waffling about this, she followed them, wondering, *What do I do, what do I do?* as the man ahead glanced back and sped up. Alice walked faster to match his pace and eventually wound up running, and before you knew it, she was chasing him, and the man shrieked and ran out of Kobiki.

The fourth case was a dramatic one. Seeing a truck that had its wheel fall off in a gutter, she trembled in joy, and then scolded herself. Even if this was her chance now, being glad of someone else's misfortune was getting her priorities backward. Unlike with the bicycle case five days earlier, she was now discriminating enough to not just rush in and jump on them.

Alice leaped over the block wall, taking care not to knock into it, sneaked up from the truck's blind spot, and grabbed it by the rear. The tires were spinning as hard as they could, but not grabbing on to anything. It wouldn't be able to get out of the gutter like this.

Alice lifted the rear of the truck with all her strength. The physical strength of a magical girl made that possible, but she wound up putting a little too much muscle into it. The truck popped up too fast and floated about three feet in the air before bouncing hard on the road.

Alice was surprised herself, but the driver must have been surprised, too. Whatever he thought about it, he went about ten feet forward, then backed up rapidly, laying flat the stunned Alice and crushing her under the tires. The tires spun on top of her, grinding away at her body, and blood spurted out. The mental shock surprised her more than the pain, and she kicked up at the car's body from below, and then the moment the truck was in the air, she escaped.

From his seat, the driver must also have felt that he was driving on something. The window opened, and the driver timidly poked his face out and looked to the rear of the vehicle. There, he must have gotten a hazy vision of Alice under the light of the old streetlamp: crushed by the truck, her body and clothes ground off by the tires, and dripping blood as she tried to stand.

With a shriek from the driver, the truck raced off, hitting and breaking the cement block wall on the inside of the curve when it turned the corner, but still didn’t stop, fleeing the scene.

Experiencing failure after failure made Alice consider things, in her own way. She wondered if maybe she wasn't cut out to be a magical girl, but immediately discarded that thought. She couldn't give up just because she screwed up a bunch of times. And it would probably be weird in the first place if she could immediately do a great job as a magical girl when she'd only just become one.

"Right now is something like your trial period, or your practice period, so it *is* kind of fine to screw up a little…but the other kids figure out how to be a magical girl pretty quickly, pon. There aren't many clumsy magical girls like you who do nothing but screw up, pon. Wait, you're not trying to establish yourself as the clumsy one, or something like that, pon? People won't like you if you're deliberately putting it on, pon."

She decided again that she wouldn't talk with the mascot.

Maybe it wasn't that Alice had no talent, but rather that the white magical girl was amazing. She had the most sightings on the aggregate site, and in the popularity polls, she won time after time. She was truly a magical girl among magical girls, someone who could be described as the pinnacle of the genre. An ordinary person like Alice trying to be at that level was naturally going to do nothing but fail. But still, if she leaned on that fact and never made any progress, then her dreams would never come true. She wouldn't be able to stand by the white magical girl's side and smile peacefully as they worked together.

What she felt most keenly from her multiple failures was that she was extremely bad at communication. She hadn't been able to have a decent conversation before she'd become a magical girl, either. Her brain wouldn't work right, and neither would her tongue, and while she was thinking about what to say next, she'd miss her moment. Magical girls helped people from the shadows, but when helping people there was always some involvement with others, however small. If she couldn't communicate properly, it would be an impediment to her magical-girl activities.

The cause of her failure was that she was doing something she wasn't typically familiar with. With this thought, Alice decided to start off with practice. Her first mistake here had been starting with high-difficulty missions: talking to people she'd only just met, with no practice at all. If she actually practiced first before facing the real thing, it was sure to go well. As she imagined her future at the white magical girl's side, her expression relaxed into a happy smile. She stuck up her index fingers to pull her lips tight into a serious expression. It was too early to smile. That came after things went well.

"Isn't it thinking simplistically to assume that things will work out with practice, pon? Experience over the long term and inborn disposition are a big part of this sort of thing, pon. If you could fix your social anxiety with just a little bit of practice, then you wouldn't need psychologists or counselors, pon."

She tucked her magical phone in the back of the drawer of her study desk, and after locking it, she went outside. Concealed in the darkness in her black costume, she slipped this way and that through the town late at night, completing her usual routine of looking for people in trouble while at the same time, she practiced talking. She used a bunny plush to be the person in trouble, speaking to it as smoothly as possible, while avoiding getting stuck or stuttering.

There were no passersby as Alice's muttering rang through the late night in Kobiki.

"Good day…no, that's not right… Good evening… Yeah, since it's night. It's night, so good evening… No…maybe it's better not to talk to you…but I don't want you being startled…so then good evening… Good evening…good evening…good evening…good evening, and then…today…the weather is nice today, huh…? It's cloudy… The sky is cloudy today… It'd be nice if we could see the moon tomorrow… Let's go with that…"

"Hey, is someone there?"

Someone suddenly speaking to her from a spot she'd thought was empty made her leap. A light swung toward her, which she avoided with a jump to the side, and she fell in the darkness, but the light followed her. She glanced over to see a couple of police officers shining their flashlights around. Being local police officers whose job it was to protect the peace, it wasn't at all strange for them to be walking around late at night.

Police officers weren't people in trouble. In fact, encountering them made *her* someone in trouble. If they asked her, "Why are you out late at night walking around in that outfit?" she could only reply, "Because I'm a magical girl," and then if they said "Okay, then we're going to talk to your parents," Alice would really be hopelessly in trouble.

Fortunately, they had yet to find her. She had managed to dodge the light of the flashlight. She trotted along behind a cement block wall and came to the road on the opposite side, but the light continued to follow her. Footsteps were coming toward her, too.

She made sure that a truck was stopped before hiding behind it. The light was still following her. Alice circled around behind the truck, and seeing that the trunk was open, she slid inside and quietly closed it on her from the inside. She heard voices from outside.

"I swear I heard a voice."

"We did hear it. Hey, you with the truck—you can't park here."

"Ah, sorry. My radio isn't working right, and I was trying to fix it."

"Parking such a big truck in a residential area in the middle of the night, everyone is going to wonder what's going on."

"Gotcha. I'll move it now."

With a *clack*, the door was closed from the outside. It seemed it was now locked. The truck started running, and Alice breathed a sigh of relief. She'd managed to get away from the police officers. Now she just had to wait until the truck stopped, and then escape.

◇ La Pucelle

Nighttime had been the most fun part of field trips back in elementary school. Going around to temples and shrines during the day was lacking in adventure to Souta Kishibe and his friends at the time, and it was also a little boring. The evening was more fun. It was overflowing with excitement—throwing pillows at each other and prodding each other about who they liked, and the brave ones would have competitive matches with the video games they'd brought.

The campsite this time around wasn't necessarily fun at night. The teacher and the coach were very strict, and if they made any noise at all, they'd zoom over and scold them. And even once it was night, there weren't any particular events aside from bathing and eating, and the most they got was a review of the day and an explanation of the next one. And after spending the day running, kicking, and yelling, none of them had the energy for anything but collapsing into bed, exhausted. Having fun over some dirty jokes in the bath like "his is particularly large" and "his is really close to a grown-up's" was closest to the field trip mood, and since it was a soccer camp, it was all soccer, all day.

But of course. That was just natural. Souta understood that, too.

But they had come all this way, rattling on the bus to a different town, so was it too much to ask to want more of a…like, "trip feeling"? Souta was just as exhausted as his teammates, but he possessed the hidden card that others didn't—transforming into a magical girl.

Transforming into the magical girl La Pucelle made it possible for him to go without sleep. Slipping out of the campground at night was forbidden, of course, but everyone was sleeping like the dead, so the odds that Souta would be found were very low.

At midnight, after making sure that everyone had fallen asleep, Souta transformed into La Pucelle. With stealthy footsteps, she passed between the rows of futons and gingerly opened the window. She made sure that nobody would notice as she sneaked out to the veranda, then closed the window. Looking up, it was a long way to the rooftop, and looking down, it was a ways below, too. She was in the middle of a ten-story building, at the fifth floor. Leaping off the veranda railing, she jumped up, then grabbed the railing of the floor above to go higher, and repeating this three times, she came to the roof. When she was in magical-girl form, she felt uneasy unless she was somewhere out of sight.

She walked along the roof fence with a bounce in her step, and after doing one circle, she came back to her original spot. The old hotel, built forty years ago, was surrounded by even older buildings, and those buildings were surrounded on all four sides by mountains, and all of them were speckled with snow, pure white and sparkly at the tops. Even if it was just an hour and a half by bus from N City, once it was winter out here, it would be buried in snow, and no one would be able to see anything anymore. The mountain tops were still white, even though this was the season for mountain snow to get muddy. A little closer to winter, and they wouldn't have been able to use the city grounds, and there would be no camp.

La Pucelle inhaled deeply. The cold woke her up and felt good, stinging wherever it touched when she inhaled. It was cold enough to freeze if she was human, but as a magical girl, it was only cool enough to moderately chill the flush of excitement from her body.

"Right, then..."

There was one thing that she had been wanting to do. This was something that was popular specifically on Magi-magi Cal-cal, the magical girl fan site that'd had the offline meetup she'd gone to before. It was to take a magical girl figure doll, a stuffed animal, or something on a trip with you, and then take a photo with it, with the local scenery in the background, for a "little trip with a magical girl." At first, they'd just been little joke posts on forums, but these days, they'd become their own independent threads, and the regulars would post photos of their favorite magical girls every day. And things would get particularly busy after long weekends and such—there would be so many images posted, the page so heavy, it was hard to scroll through it.

The hard-cores were particularly enthusiastic, even for regulars of a message board filled with hard-core fans, to the point it seemed to put the casual fans off a little. La Pucelle was, if anything, the type who would watch from afar thinking, *"They really go for it, huh?"* But she also kind of admired what they did.

She kind of wanted to do it herself, although not so much that she would go through all the preparation to go for a photo trip. This was just a little imitation, a side bonus to the camp—and that was fine. Her only tool for photography was her smartphone, and her subject was a little keychain—that was enough. Trying with something bigger was bound to lead to Souta's teammates noticing during the camp and cause a major disaster. Just imagining that happening gave her chills.

La Pucelle stretched with a groan and gazed up at the sky. The sky looked like it was in a bad mood. It was all black, like rain or snow would fall at any minute. She bent back even farther, and with her back arched so far she was almost in a bridge, she turned her face to the opposite side. Her horns clunked the floor, and she snapped back into her original position.

It would be a nice idea to walk through the town, after all. She could take a casual stroll, wander around, and check out the town. If she found any interesting sights, she would take a photo there. She figured she would get teased if Fav saw her, so she left her magical phone in her bag at the hotel. She would use her own smartphone to take cute, pretty pictures of her keychain of the first-generation Cutie Healer. Because she'd once gotten two of this keychain, she had given one of them to her childhood friend, who also liked magical girls. Somehow or other, she'd missed her chance to ask if said childhood friend—Koyuki Himekawa—still had it. She had probably forgotten it, but to Souta Kishibe, the item had memories. They didn't make them anymore, and it was fairly rare now, making it perfect for a commemorative photograph.

La Pucelle ran down the wall of the hotel and landed in the parking lot, racing through it in a few steps to ascend from a cement block wall to the roof of a residential house, and from there she ran along the rooftops.

She immediately found something interesting. There was an old, worn-out, and rusted sign installed over the entrance of a factory. Based on how worn it was, it was probably from the Showa period—about mid-Showa, too. On it, the middle-aged man in glasses holding up a vitamin drink, who looked like a TV entertainer, was one Souta Kishibe didn't know. There was a nice clash or contrast between that and Cutie Healer, who had come out in the Heisei era. She would take a picture here.

Then there was an eatery that was probably named after the owner or founder that was primitive not just in its name, but in its look. It was plain. Whether it was out of business or still running, it was difficult to tell at this time of day. She would get a shot here, too.

There was a beauty parlor beside another beauty parlor. Looking at the posters, it seemed like they were still putting up new ones, and the sign decorating the shop next door also seemed to be cleaned. In other words, both of them were in business. They had to be in competition, but for some reason, they both stood here. One of them had to have started after the other—that hadn't caused any problems? It was interesting to think about it more deeply. She'd take a shot here, too.

You could find some fairly interesting stuff walking around a normal town, even if there weren't any well-known tourist spots. With a decent sense of satisfaction and a few not-so-bad image files in hand, La Pucelle continued her walk. Unlike in N City, she didn't have to hold back because it was someone else's territory ahead or whatever, and there was hardly anyone walking around at night. She could go down the street freely and openly.

Walking a little farther, she saw a convenience store. It had a bigger parking lot compared to the convenience stores of N City, probably because it was more rural. Parked in that huge convenience store parking lot was a single large truck. It was almost touching the cement block wall. It was parked carelessly, too, sitting diagonally across the parking spaces. Somewhat curious, La Pucelle sneaked up to the truck and peered inside.

The driver had pulled down the seats and had a weekly magazine well known for gossip over his face as he slept. He didn't seem to be suffering or writhing around. He was snoring, which she confirmed from the peaceful rise and fall of his chest. La Pucelle was about to move away from the truck when her feet froze. The cargo hatch at the rear of the truck was slightly ajar. La Pucelle glanced toward the convenience store; the clerk was yawning wide at the ceiling, not even trying to hide it. They didn't seem to notice her.

If the truck drove off, then the cargo could fall out. The driver would be in trouble, and the car behind them might wrench a wheel, trying to avoid the cargo. That would definitely cause a big accident.

La Pucelle approached the four-foot-tall cement block wall, reached out a hand, and closed the truck's rear hatch. Right when she was thinking she'd lock it, the hatch opened again.

La Pucelle furrowed her eyebrows. She'd closed the hatch decently hard, but now it was open. It had opened pretty hard, too, hitting the cement block wall and making a loud noise. Neither the driver nor the store clerk seemed to have noticed.

She tried closing the hatch again when she realized: Something was pressing against the hatch from the inside of the truck. Her furrowed eyebrows slowly rose. Someone was trying to open the hatch. Were they trapped?

Readying herself in a low stance, La Pucelle reached for the hilt of her sword on her back. Before long, there was a creaking sound, and the hatch opened to the point where it touched the cement block wall. There *was* someone inside—someone as strong as a magical girl. La Pucelle heard a nasty sound, like something dragging itself along. There was a bump, then something spurting, then a groan—a voice.

La Pucelle's body reacted to the voice. She clenched her right hand, clasping the hilt of her sword.

It wasn't just the voice. When she sniffed, her nose was struck with an unpleasant smell that made her feel viscerally revolted. A dripping sound mingled with the voice. She looked down to see a large volume of blood flowing endlessly from the vehicle's trunk, making her gulp. Something slithered out and splattered into a puddle of blood.

La Pucelle very hesitantly peeked to the other side of the wall to see what had fallen. The moment she grasped what it was, she did three backflips, drew her sword, and readied herself in a battle stance.

It was an arm. Roughly cut from the shoulder, it belonged to a human—probably a child, from a girl of about middle school age. Even without comparing it to the vivid red blood, the color of its skin was white as snow. La Pucelle pressed a hand to her chest. Her heart was pounding, and she was hyperventilating.

Something else fell out. This time, it was a leg. Nausea welled up, and she covered her mouth. The sound of her sword hitting the ground made her realize she'd let go of it, and she hastily picked it up again. Hearing the sound of something else hitting the pool of blood, La Pucelle raised her head, steeled herself, and looked.

Her eyes widened. She didn't want to see it, but she couldn't turn away. Lying there was one more leg—before had been the right, and now it was the left—and then the torso of what looked like a girl wearing a black dress. The torso had only the right arm remaining. The left arm, both legs, and the head were gone, and fresh blood spurted from the roughly cut wounds.

She wanted to run away. But she couldn't do it. La Pucelle painted over her fear with rage. A girl had been killed. The one who had done such a thing was most likely still in the truck. He had taken apart his poor victim inside his truck, and then he had dumped it outside like garbage. This was unforgivable.

La Pucelle leaped over the cement block wall, closing the distance cautiously—one step, two. Destroying the door of the truck would be easy with the strength of a magical girl. La Pucelle swung her sword up, aiming for the door, and there she felt something strange at her ankles. She looked down and froze.

Coming from the puddle of blood and leaving a crawling trail like a slug, the girl's torso had come to La Pucelle's feet, its right arm extended to grab her ankle. It clasped her with the strength of a living creature, but she felt no body heat in it at all.

La Pucelle let out a shout and swung up her leg. But the girl's corpse grabbed her ankle firmly and wouldn't let go. La Pucelle shook it back and forth, but it refused to let go, and La Pucelle shrieked.

La Pucelle squatted down, peeled off the torso with all her strength, flung it into the pool of blood, and ran off.

She had no clue what had just happened. She was simply scared. Her body told her to run, and so she did, and when she turned back, wondering if she'd gotten away, a bright red lump of flesh was rolling after her with fearsome speed, leaving a bloody trail as it pursued her. A cry that surprised even her leaked out from the back of her throat. She made her sword small and tucked it into her sheath, waving both her hands wildly as she sprinted down the main street with a loud cry somewhere between a shriek and a roar, running up the wall of the second-largest building in the city after the hotel, and landing on both feet on the roof.

It wasn't like she'd run very far at all, but her shoulders were heaving. She timidly looked out from the top of the building, and when she peeked below…there was nothing there. She sighed with relief from the bottom of her heart, then sat down on the spot. She breathed in and out a few times, and she had just calmed down somewhat when a strange sound struck her ears.

She lifted her face. She had heard this sound before. It was a sickening sound, like crawling or writhing, discomposing the heart of whoever heard it. Getting up, she turned around.

There was something there past the fence on the opposite side from where La Pucelle had come, a hand on the fence, climbing up. Yes, it was a hand. A torso and a leg followed. Though when she had seen it in front of the convenience store, it had been in pieces, now the torso was growing four limbs. But it was moving stiffly, like it was inhuman. Most of all, the head was missing.

There was the drip of blood. A *plip, plip* followed, dirtying the concrete.

The corpse of the headless girl was about to cross over the iron railing when it swayed to the right, then to the left like it was trying to catch its balance, maintaining a delicate equilibrium as it came down onto the roof. Something cold ran up La Pucelle's back, and she panicked and drew her sword.

La Pucelle drew her sword right as the corpse approached. What should have been one step forward closed three steps' distance all at once. The unexpected lurch gave La Pucelle a fright, and she swung her sword without thinking, but then it looked like it would hit the corpse, making her panic even more, and she forced her swing to turn the other way. Instead of a straight swing, the sword's trajectory bent at an acute angle, skimming the iron fence to hit the roof and send concrete fragments flying. Forcing her swing in the other direction made her hands slip, and she dropped her sword. It rolled along, clanging, to stop at the corpse's feet.

"Ah, hey…"

The corpse took one heavy step forward. La Pucelle's sword, touching the corpse's heel, slid behind the corpse, right to the edge of the iron railing.

"Ah, um, hold on. My sword—"

The corpse took a step forward, and La Pucelle leaped back. The end of her tail touched the iron railing, telling her that there was no space for her on the roof. The corpse took two more thudding steps forward, and La Pucelle leaped down from the roof, landing on a promenade-style lane and dashing off.

Hearing something quickly approaching, La Pucelle sped up without looking back. Nobody could keep up with a magical girl's legs—but the footsteps followed. She clenched her teeth and sped up more. The sounds still hadn't left. She moved her legs with all her soul, at the absolute maximum speed. The footsteps kept up with her. When she looked back, thinking, *That can't be,* she saw the headless corpse sprinting after her while swinging its arms, and a sound she'd never heard from herself came from the depths of her throat. The corpse was running now as if its earlier jerky movements had never been—with proper arm swings, like a sprinter.

She had to be hallucinating. While running, La Pucelle turned back one more time, and this time she let out a shriek instead of stifling it. A jaw had grown above the neck. A tongue extended from it, and the lower teeth were breaking through flesh in an attempt to grow in.

Whatwhatisthatwhatisthatwhatisthatwhat?! Is that?! What?!

Averting her eyes from the extremely grotesque sight, she bounded off a telephone pole and went over the netting to enter the school courtyard. She cut through the schoolyard, kicking up dust as she went, maintaining her speed as she raced up the school building. The corpse was unflinching in the face of such vertical movement and kept after her. La Pucelle desperately ran over the roof fence, and from there she leaped to a neighboring roof. When she made the jump, she was so desperate she didn't notice, but in the middle of the jump, it struck her—this was a pretty hard jump, even with a magical girl's powerful legs.

No—even if it was hard, she had to make it somehow.

At around three feet left, where she just barely couldn't reach even if she stretched out her arm, she extended her tail to the fence opposite her and grabbed it. She normally didn't use it, but her tail was about as strong as her other limbs. Supporting her full body weight with only her tail bent the fence, but she still somehow clung on.

The corpse didn't have a tail.

Arms and legs extended, it slammed into the pavement without breaking its fall. Blood spurted up, rocks cracked, and it flailed its arms twice before suddenly losing strength and collapsing.

From atop the roof, La Pucelle held her breath and looked down. The corpse's right elbow and waist were twisted at unnatural angles. Even a zombie wouldn't be able to move in that state…probably.

The corpse jerked upward. The bones that should have been broken had gone back to normal. Its right elbow bent at ninety degrees, its waist twisted, and it put both hands to a window frame to climb up the school building with vim and vigor.

La Pucelle ran off once more. She had tears in her eyes that she couldn't explain as she sprinted along. It was as if a nightmare she'd had when she was young had come back in the flesh. There was an undead enemy in pursuit, and no matter how she ran and ran, she couldn't escape. Eyelashes wet with tears, she moved her legs. No way was she going to stop here and get killed.

La Pucelle went for a new route. She left the city center and moved away from the hotel, too. The corpse didn't care, hot on her heels. La Pucelle gradually quickened her pace, but her pursuer sped up, too. At this rate, it would be the same as before. The faster she ran, the more intently the corpse chased her.

Eventually, she couldn't go any faster, but the corpse was keeping up with her anyway. And since La Pucelle was concentrating purely on speed, she wasn't able to avoid obstacles—she kicked over a plastic bucket that had been left behind the eatery, lost her balance, and started falling, but somehow stayed on her feet. The lid of the bucket loudly rolled around as the corpse leaped to evade the fallen bucket and knocked into the sign of a standing-only bar.

La Pucelle didn't have the presence of mind to notice the disturbance and kept on running. About a minute later, when she realized that it was quiet behind her, La Pucelle checked back out from the corner of her eye, but she couldn't see the corpse. She relaxed a bit and slowed her pace, then came to a stop, and got a proper look behind her. She let out a deep breath, seeing it somehow looked like she'd managed to shake it off, but when she looked ahead again, she shrieked. The corpse, which should have been behind her, was somehow coming toward her from around the bend ahead. La Pucelle clambered up the traffic sign that was right to her side, getting some recoil out of it to get up to the roof of a small building nearby. The corpse followed La Pucelle and tried to climb the wall.

"Why? Why are you following me?!" La Pucelle cried.

No response. The corpse again steadily and wordlessly pursued her. The regeneration of the corpse's head had reached underneath its nose, its mouth breathing without issue. It didn't yell, or moan, or speak—the way it just dispassionately used its mouth for breathing evoked an indescribable fear that sent a shiver down La Pucelle's spine. Its lips were well-shaped, but pallid, and its skin was a sickly white on which was cast the red of blood and organs.

Each and every thing about it was utterly terrifying. La Pucelle wanted the thing to disappear from her sight as soon as possible, but no matter how much she ran, it followed her everywhere and wouldn't let her go. La Pucelle cried, wailed, and ran some more.

Knocking down an obstacle on the way—

Will that work?!

—running through a dilapidated spot and making the corpse stumble—

Did I do it?!

—getting a number of obstacles between them—

Yesss!

—but it kept following her anyway, without giving up.

Gyaaaaaaaaaaaagh!

La Pucelle couldn't take this any longer. She headed from the city center into the mountains.

Going along a road that spiraled upward, she grabbed a tree branch, headed onto an animal trail, and leaped up into the trees. Coniferous trees rustled as snow fell from them, La Pucelle racing through as it scattered all around, kicking snow in her wake as she sped along as fast as she could. The corpse did the same, close at her heels. It used tree branches like a monkey or feral child—which really clashed with its black dress, but that didn't bother it as it stuck right on La Pucelle's tail. Its head had already regenerated up to the top of its shapely nose, and it was writhing around in a distorted mess as it tried to form what looked like a brain.

Who knew what would happen if the corpse fully regenerated. La Pucelle was about to reach her limit, body and spirit. She had to come up with some way to escape.

The corpse showed no signs of slowing, either. Its all-black dress—let alone those cute black shoes—really wasn't suited to the snowy mountains, although La Pucelle's outfit wasn't remotely appropriate, either. But the corpse was pursuing La Pucelle faster than a vehicle on a major road.

Souta Kishibe was born in N City, a place fairly famous for the depth of its snow, so he knew quite a bit about snow himself. In a chase through the snow, the pursuer was generally at the advantage. You'd have the advantage in speed going along the trail, as it would be tamped down by the one in the lead, and you wouldn’t use as much energy, either.

The distance between the two of them was closing bit by bit. The enemy extended a hand, the nails at the end of it skimming La Pucelle’s tail. La Pucelle panicked and wrapped her tail around her body. It was definitely catching up. La Pucelle’s breath came out in an endless stream of white puffs. A tireless magical girl was becoming exhausted.

A white rabbit that ran into their chase hastily ran behind a rock. The rabbit’s footsteps dotted the snow—but there were also some fine ski marks in the snow, too. So that meant there was a skier. The trail was still new, and there was no snow on top of it. In a scene that was so pastoral, so slice of life, she had the regenerating dead chasing her from behind.

At this point, I’ll take anything! I have to bet on this!

La Pucelle released her tail, which she had been hugging to her chest. Her tail snapped away again, sweeping aside the whiteness and smacking the enemy with a lump of snow as it scattered flakes all around the area, coloring their field of view white. From there, she took a one step, two step run-up, jumping on her third step, removing the sheath on her back as she twisted around in midair and faced the enemy.

“A-all right! Come at me!”

The snow blind cleared. The shape of the black dress slowly became clear, making a beautiful contrast with the white snow. Yes, it naturally seemed *beautiful* to her. Even though it was a zombie that was gradually regenerating the skin on top of its exposed skull, it still seemed beautiful.

The corpse stomped down on the snow as it approached La Pucelle. One step, two. La Pucelle desperately played it cool, folding both arms in front of her chest as she stared fixedly at the corpse. The corpse must have been frightened of her gaze, as it faltered a moment, but it still didn’t stop walking. It took another step, and then another, cutting through the snow as it moved forward, and when it took another big step, the snow crumbled.

The corpse reached an arm out forward, but grabbing at crumbling snow wasn’t going to be any support at all. It rolled down into the bottom of the valley along with the scattering snow.

After that, La Pucelle was left alone. She had thrust the sheath of her sword into the side of the cliff and was standing on top of it. At a glance, it would look as if she was standing on snow, but what was supporting her body weight was her sheath, made gigantic. The corpse, unaware of that, had stepped onto the weak overhanging snow, which would crumble with weight, and had fallen to the bottom of the cliff.

But because it was a zombie with such vitality, La Pucelle doubted it was over yet. If she used snow and ice to slow down her pursuer with the low temperature and guided it deeper and deeper into the mountains to freeze it, then even a zombie would be unable to move. That was how the monster had been defeated in the splatter horror movie that Winterprison had dragged her to the other day.

Buried in the snow at the bottom of the cliff, the corpse shouldn't have been able to move—but La Pucelle furrowed her brow. There was something like white smoke rising from the bottom of the cliff. Was that snow? Leaning out from atop her sheath, she looked down. Snow like white smoke was gradually spreading to swallow up the rocks. It was moving toward the slope with fearsome speed, making the ground rumble—

Is that…an avalanche?!

The mass of white crushed everything in its path. Who knew where it would stop? The ski tracks that La Pucelle had seen on the way rose in her mind, and she raced out. If the avalanche were to keep going, it might hit the unknowing skier. La Pucelle was the one who had caused this avalanche—it would never have happened, originally. She had heard that spring snow could sometimes cause terrible avalanches. How far would this go, and how much would it swallow up?

The avalanche was going faster than a car, but La Pucelle at full speed was even faster. However—her footing was too rough now. She couldn't go full speed here, like she could on a paved road. Struggling with the deeply rooted snow that pulled at her legs, she kicked it up as she pushed forward, but no matter how she moved her feet, she couldn't get as fast as she wanted, and she couldn't get closer to the avalanche—in fact, it was moving farther away.

La Pucelle cried out. She absolutely wouldn't let someone die, even if it meant her life. She would save them, no matter what. Moving her legs in refusal to give in to the snow, she ran desperately. Things went white in every direction at some point, but she quickly got through it. There was nothing moving. The snow stood still as a lump, and she could see a number of treetops atop it.

The avalanche had stopped. Had the coniferous forest acted like a shield and stopped it?

The white smoke gradually cleared, and from the white, a black form appeared. It was the corpse in the black dress, with snow all over, standing on top of the lump of snow that had been rolling down the slope just now. La Pucelle gasped and looked up at the corpse; it raised its right hand and pointed ahead.

There was a ski trail on the slope. It wasn't the beautiful curve that she had seen earlier. It was twisted and curved, with ski pole holes, messed up enough that she could imagine how panicked they were.

"Were they…able to escape?" La Pucelle asked.

The corpse tilted its head heavily to the front, its long black hair bouncing. Then it immediately straightened up again.

"Did you…just nod?"

The corpse tilted its body in the same way, hair bouncing, then went upright again. Apparently, La Pucelle's interpretation was correct.

"I see…"

That's good, La Pucelle thought. She started to feel relieved. But even if this skier was safe, it wasn't necessarily that there hadn't been anyone caught in the avalanche. La Pucelle was obligated to make sure that nobody had been caught in it. She used her enlarged sheath as a shovel and stabbed it into the mass of snow, digging it up with her magical girl strength. With a speed no lesser than the speed of heavy machinery, she dug her way through the snow.

Sensing a presence, she looked beside her to see the corpse grabbing the snow mass with its bare hands and tossing it behind it. Seeing her move with such focus, La Pucelle felt something well up inside her and looked up into the dark and cloudy sky. After blinking a few times, she turned back again to look at the dead girl in black one more time.

It seemed the corpse's regeneration was complete, but it still didn't look alive. The color of its skin and lips was far from a living person's, and the deep, dark color of its eyes and the heavy circles underneath them further fostered that impression. Its wavy black hair went down to its waist, so long that it made the dead girl seem even more unreal. But this girl's corpse, who gave no sense of having the energy of a living creature, was moving with vigor as it silently dug up the snow.

Thinking back on it now, La Pucelle had a feeling like this girl had never actually harmed anything. No—there hadn't even been once. La Pucelle had just been scared of its frightening appearance. The corpse had simply chased La Pucelle—

"Huh? Now that I think about it, why were you chasing me?" La Pucelle asked.

The corpse placed the lump of snow in its hands on the ground, and from its pocket it pulled out a doll attached to a keychain. That small, cute thing was a prize item, a Chibi first-generation Cutie Healer. Souta Kishibe had one, too. In fact, he'd been taking pictures of it not long ago.

"Wait, that's mine," La Pucelle said. "Did I…drop it?"

The corpse leaned forward and then stood back up.

"You picked it up…and tried to give it back?"

The corpse leaned forward and then stood back up.

"Oh…"

Seeing that La Pucelle was not going to say anything further, the corpse returned to its task. It grabbed lumps of snow in its bare hands and tossed them aside. Even with frozen hands, doing something that would certainly cause frostbite for a human, it was no problem for a corpse. It didn't balk at the cold or chill, silently grabbing snow and tossing it away.

"Hold up." La Pucelle stopped the corpse and shoved her sheath into its hands. "Use this. I'll dig with my hands."

The corpse moved its hands like it was trying to communicate something—most likely, it was trying to say that it didn't need the sheath—But La Pucelle paid that no mind, wiping the tears on her cheeks off with the back of her hand. She grabbed the snow with her bare hands and tossed it to the side just like the corpse had. Seeing that, the corpse stopped for a while, then eventually it used the sheath like a shovel, as La Pucelle had, and started to dig through the snow.

This simple and icy task was perfect for La Pucelle's current state of mind. She wanted to punish herself. She was ashamed of her prejudice in assuming purely based on looks that the dead girl was a filthy monster, and felt so bad, she wanted to disappear. The cleanup they were doing now had all been caused by La Pucelle's own personal failure. And even though there was fundamentally no need for it to help, the corpse was doing this out of its own goodwill. It was far more upstanding than La Pucelle, who was a magical girl and a knight.

La Pucelle shut her eyes. It felt as if tears would spill out again if she let them.

“…Sorry,” she managed while still shoveling.

While digging up snow with the sheath, the corpse tilted its body to the right.

“You don’t know what I’m apologizing for?”

The corpse then tilted its body to the left before coming back to the center.

“It’s fine. I was a fool. I did something awful to you. I really…I really am sorry. I did something I should be ashamed of, as a magical girl…”

The corpse released the sheath, clapped its hands, and pointed to itself. “I’m…a magical girl, too.”

“Huh?” The surprise of this dead girl being able to speak and the surprise of her being a magical girl combined to leave La Pucelle shocked, at a loss for words, and confused. “Huh? What? Oh, you’re a magical girl.”

The girl tilted forward, stood back up, then took the sheath again and returned to her task.

“A magical girl… Right,” said La Pucelle. “Huh… So you’re just a magical girl.”

She wasn’t a zombie. While La Pucelle was relieved, she was also angry. She was mad at herself.

Just because she had no head, La Pucelle had assumed the girl was a monster, and even witnessing the supernatural phenomenon of her moving around as a dead body in pieces, she hadn’t even considered that she could be a magical girl. Saying she had been panicking, or she had been flustered were complete excuses. Swallowing a sigh, La Pucelle continued at her task.

◇ Hardgore Alice

On the way back from the mountains, she found out that she was in D City of the same prefecture. She hadn’t thought that there would be magical girls outside of N City.

The local magical girl, La Pucelle, apologized profusely, bowing her head to Alice many times. She bowed her head so much that Alice wound up remembering the horns growing from the top of her head better than what sort of expression she wore.

"I'm sorry, I really am sorry. This was my fault. I've done something awful."

She had to be talking about how she'd run away. Alice understood her feelings, so she couldn't really blame her. Alice had tried to get out from the parked truck, and the cement block wall had gotten in the way—the hatch of the trunk refused to open all the way. There hadn't been enough space for Alice to get out, but then she hadn't wanted to destroy the truck and cause trouble, either. So then she'd considered what to do and had come up with an idea.

Her body kept getting stuck because she was trying to get out normally. So then what if she chopped her body into five parts to make herself more compact—would she manage to get out all right then? This strategy started off working. But she hadn't considered how it would look to someone else if they found a person trying to get out like that. If Alice were in La Pucelle's position, she would certainly have assumed it was a splatter horror monster.

Through repeated experiments, Alice had learned that she would not die from external wounds. Cut, stab, and burn her a little, and she could still move without issue. But it wasn't as if anyone else shared that information. If they saw her, they'd think she was a monster and treat her like one.

Alice wanted to say all this to make her feel better and tell her it was fine, but as she was thinking about how she should say it, the subject shifted to something else.

Even after they'd finished digging up the snow and made sure there were no victims, La Pucelle continued to apologize the whole time. She deplored her inexperience as a magical girl for making things get this way, saying that her teacher or her partner would have been able to make better decisions. As she was talking about this, gradually the focus of the conversation drifted, and before they knew it, she was bragging about her partner. She said she was kind and pure, and truly a magical girl among magical girls. Then quietly, she added, "And she's super cute," blushing of her own accord.

Hardgore Alice wanted to argue. The only one who was "kind and pure and truly a magical girl among magical girls" was the magical girl in white who had saved Ako.

Unfortunately, she wasn't able to verbalize this very well. She simply let La Pucelle speak as she pleased and chewed over her frustration, unable to do anything but silently apologize to the magical girl in white: *"I'm sorry I'm not able to preach about how wonderful you are."* And so the two of them went down the mountain and returned to the parking lot from whence they'd come.

The area around the truck was as quiet as if nothing had happened, and there was no blood, head, guts, arms, or legs. This was something Alice had learned through her experiments—the severed parts and blood that flowed out from Alice's body would disappear very quickly. She didn't know how it worked, but regardless, she was thankful she didn't have to clean up every time.

"Right. I have to get back," La Pucelle said with a tired smile, and Alice took her hand to stop her. Since Alice had come here in the truck, she didn't know how she would get back to N City. Even if it would be a bother to ask to be shown back, she wanted La Pucelle to point her in the right direction, at least.

As she was thinking about how she would broach such a request, La Pucelle interpreted this hand-holding as Alice's reluctance to part ways. La Pucelle shook her hand and smiled. "Thank you… Looks like you've forgiven me. You really are a great magical girl."

The words "great magical girl" made Alice happy. She squirmed around like she was writhing in agony, shaking her head and muttering under her breath. La Pucelle raised a hand, and with a final "See you," she raced off. Alice reached out her right arm, but as she was thinking about how to call her to stop, La Pucelle vanished.

Her mouth still open, Alice slowly looked around the area. The night was faintly beginning to dawn. Wondering if there was some kind of sign with directions, she walked down the road a while. Though she found a large sign in front of the park, it was all place names she didn't know, and she wasn't sure where she should go or how. And the map was too localized anyway, making Alice feel like she wasn't able to get the information she wanted.

Noticing that her mouth was still open, Alice slowly closed it.

She made up her mind. She would ask someone for directions.

After all, she was no longer the Ako Hatoda who had avoided getting involved with others—Hardgore Alice was planning to be a magical girl beloved by all, and so she should be able to have a totally normal conversation.

There was nobody around because it was too early in the morning, but that issue would be solved by time. It was around the time of day when a jogger, a person going for a morning walk, or someone like that would be appearing soon. She turned around to come face-to-face with an old man with a dog. The old man was looking at Alice with wide eyes.

Alice remembered her training for improving her communication skills. It was no good to be nervous. She was going to be natural, *so* natural, as she spoke to him coolly and smoothly.

But she was too far away for that. So Alice raced out to approach the old man, but she dashed out so fast, she ran into a mailbox, lost her balance, and fell diagonally forward, and then got caught on the park's wire mesh.

The old man's eyes widened even further. He was shocked. This was no good. She would get the same results as last time. To emphasize that this was really no big deal…oh yeah, she should just smile. The white magical girl had melted Ako Hatoda's heart with a wonderful smile. La Pucelle had also had a charming smile. So then Hardgore Alice should also be able to make friends with people by smiling.

Alice beamed at him. She had no mirror, so she didn't exactly know what her face looked like, but she was sure she was smiling sweetly.

The old man's throat shuddered, and he let out an earsplitting shriek before racing off just as fast as his dog, without looking back. He dropped the scooper and the plastic bag he'd been carrying but kept on running, bolting around a corner and going out of sight.

Alice squatted down and picked up the scoop and the plastic bag. So now she had to deliver these? The work of a magical girl was never-ending. With a brief nod, Alice raced off.

Festival Day

This story takes place shortly before the events of *Magical Girl Raising Project*.

Debut

TV anime *Magical Girl Raising Project*
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Festival Day

As was indicated by its conventional, unimaginative name, N City's Spring Festival was held every year in the spring. It was said to have originally been a festival to pray for a good harvest of that year's grains, but then various other elements had been added in, and it wound up completely different from the original festival. The free hydrangea tea that was offered was thought to be a remnant of the Buddha's birthday, the way everyone gathered in the center of the castle ruins was thought to originate in a feast to welcome a new castle lord after the battle of Sekigahara, and then there were the landmark three thousand Yoshino cherry trees, which had apparently been planted in commemoration of winning a war by Meiji period soldiers in their hometowns—and all of that was said to have become the present-day Spring Festival. The display of illuminated cherry blossom trees at night was thought to be one of the greatest in Japan in scale and beauty, and many connoisseurs would list it at the top of the hundred best nighttime cherry blossom spots.

N City was overflowing with tourists at this time of year. And it wasn't just the tourists—the locals loved the Spring Festival, too. They would visit the festival venues with family, friends, or lovers. If you had no one to go with, you would come alone. Even those who normally were hard-pressed to keep up with their lives and had no interest in festivals and all that would wind up wandering in when it came time for the Spring Festival.

Even people whose days flew by like arrows, exhausted and out of breath just trying to support themselves with no time to spare, would notice it was that season again when they saw the traffic being blocked off, the signboards advertising it, the bulletin from the city hall, or the cherry blossoms budding open. When that happened, even those who avoided crowds, those who disliked noise, those with a hobby of tagging the wall of the city hall with graffiti, those who bragged at every opportunity about how they had kicked over the lectern at their ceremony of adulthood, those with the depressing urge to shoot up their workplace right away if they ever got a machine gun—they all wandered in, and they would either feel something powerful or leave without feeling particularly anything at all. It wasn't like they harbored love of their hometown or a sense of belonging. They'd just sort of wind up joining in the festival.

There were a number of things in that year's festival that were different from past years. The cherry blossoms were blooming a little early, and the cleaning of clogged fallen leaves from the central pond had dragged out, so right in the middle of the festival they were unable to use the pedal-boats. The person who'd just inherited the dango shop *Mochiyasu* was holding a raffle skewer dango campaign in celebration of its remodeling, causing a surprising response on various social media sites. And there was one more thing. Due to the influence of the (locally popular) mobile game *Magical Girl Raising Project*, the street stalls were lined with more goods related to magical girls than in previous years.

That last thing was pretty big—apparently, there were more than a few drunks at the standing-only bars and *izakayas*, who bemoaned that the festival was completely different from before and that it never used to be to be such a geeky kind of festival.

That year's *Cutie Healer* cotton candy packages were the same as every other year. But they even had *Cutie Healer* series that were long over, plus magical girl characters from years gone by, like Magical Daisy, Hiyoko-chan, and Miko-chan, also occupying major places.

Even with the lottery prizes, magical girl items like magic batons, costumes, and plush mascot characters were prominent, and the yo-yo fishing and rubber ball fishing prizes had illustrations of magical girls on them. Cutie Altair was drawn on the *takoyaki* stand sign, biting into a big octopus, and the turtle-scooping sign had Miko-chan with a turtle shell on her back. This rather absurd use of magical girls brought snickers from those few citizens who had watched the shows in question.

◇ Souta Kishibe

After soccer practice, once it was dark, Souta went to the festival with a few of his friends, and there he ran into an incredible lucky find. But even saying that, it wasn't as if he could leap on it immediately. Souta Kishibe was a middle school boy and soccer club member—his magical girl hobby was something he could never expose, a secret among secrets that he had to hold until he was deep in the grave. While praying that the *thing* he'd just found would not be discovered by some other hard-core fan with a good eye, he calmed his racing heart and walked on with his friends, and after doing one circle of the area at a quick pace, he lied and said he "suddenly remembered he had to do something" and left them to run off at full speed, then circled back to the shooting stand.

Quickly ducking behind a tree, he poked out just his head and looked at the shooting stand, checking the item he was after as he turned on his smartphone, compared it with the image that came up in the search, and ascertained that what he had found was the real thing. It was without question a commemorative plaque from the *Cutie Healer World Premium* film premiere. This fan item was made to commemorate the film's release in North America, and hardly any were circulating in Japan. It was very rare for one to be on the market. Souta had searched the auctions almost every day back when they'd been made, but one had never come up.

The plaque had all the main characters, villains, and allies from the entire *Cutie Healer* series together in their signature poses. These were the profoundly memorable characters that Souta had always admired since he was little. The illustration felt both nostalgic and fresh—perhaps because the designs were modernized. It was just sitting there at the top of the display at the shooting booth, but it was actually giving Souta the feeling of being looked down on from above by a king on his throne. It had no nicks. It looked like there was no dirt. To think such a mint-condition item would be in a place like this…

Souta took some deep breaths, then dropped his phone in his pocket. Peeking his face out from behind the street stall, he checked around the area. Of course he didn't want to be seen by his friends or teammates. But he couldn't even let himself be seen by an acquaintance. A local festival with a large turnout meant he wouldn't be able to go completely unseen, but he would risk exposing his magical-girl secret as little as possible.

Pulling out four one hundred yen coins from his wallet, he handed them to the bearded stall vendor.

He couldn't get too worked up. He absolutely couldn't let trembling hands make the gun shake and throw his aim off.

And he couldn't show that he was worked up, either. He had to make it so that if someone from somewhere were to see Souta right now, they would not assume that this was a guy desperate to get some magical girl merch. He had to make it seem like he was trying to get something else the whole time, and since he didn't manage that, he'd just knocked down the commemorative plaque by chance. He had to make sure to keep up the act even after he successfully won the item, making it seem like "It's too bad I couldn't get the item I wanted" and acting reluctant as he went home with the plaque.

He checked around, then leaned way forward. He set his left arm on the counter, coming forward farther even if it meant coming up off his toes. He extended his arms to the point where he was keenly aware of the joints of his shoulders and the tendons of his elbows and wrists, while meanwhile, he kept the gun sights blurred until the moment of the shoot. His goal would be completely transparent if he aimed for his goal in a straight line from the start.

Not letting the feelings in his heart show on his face, he shifted and pointed the gun away an appropriate amount while still fixing his sights on a single point. The Dark Cute and Cutie Altair drawn on the acrylic plaque had their fingers lightly tangled together. There were no other fan items where these two were holding hands—and, of course, no official merch. This was unique, a super-valuable item that couldn't be found elsewhere. If you were a *Cutie Healer* fan—no, if you were a magical girl fan—then this was a mouth-watering item that anyone would want. He shot it.

It was the best timing and hit in the best spot. He got a clean hit on the upper inch of the plaque, which was about twelve inches wide, on a spot that would definitely make it lose its balance. The cork bullet shot out from his gun, then made a light *pop* as it was knocked away, bouncing off to hit the pillar of the street stall, where it lost its momentum and fell to the ground.

Souta was dumbfounded, but he quickly pulled himself together. He loaded his next bullet and fired. A hit. The bullet was repelled, and the light-looking acrylic plaque didn't move—it didn't so much as twitch. Souta stopped trying to hide what he was doing. He gave everything he had, aimed for the plaque from the start, and fired, fired, fired. Every shot hit—and though he hit it on different spots, like the center, right side, or left side, the plaque didn't budge by even a hair.

He handed four more one hundred yen coins to the stall vendor, then got change for a thousand yen bill, then change for a five hundred yen coin, and the next thousand yen bill he handed over, he added two hundred yen to it and didn't get change for three rounds' worth, accepting a total of nine cork bullets. But no matter how many he tried to strike in succession, the plaque never moved and wouldn't fall over.

He was out of cork bullets again. Souta reached for his wallet to pay even more money, and then a thick hand lay over his, startling him. He looked up and saw the bearded stall vendor watching him with an apologetic expression.

"Leave it at that," the vendor said. "That thing's not worth getting so serious over."

Souta realized something. The vendor's expression and attitude, and the acrylic plaque being so unmoving, as if it were fixed there, were all telling. The shop vendor knew what the plaque was worth, too—and he was using it to bring in customers. Just like when a lottery booth had a brand-new game console as a prize, or when the water balloons with cash in them were displayed at the yo-yo scooping, he never intended to let them be taken.

Souta breathed a deep sigh and reflected upon the weight of the thing he had failed to acquire.

"Pardon me… Could I at least see it up close?" he asked.

"No photos or touching, so keep that in mind. Aw, I really am sorry."

Souta was invited into the stall, and the commemorative plaque looked even more dazzling up close. Observing and enjoying how Dark Cutie looked a little bit shy, and how Cutie Orca and Cutie Penguin had swapped their poses, and more, Souta opened his eyes wide, set his brain free, and experienced it to the fullest, then bowed to the stall vendor and left.

He should have been so frustrated and sad over this disappointment, but he felt mysteriously refreshed.

◇ **Nana Habutae**

It was a target shooting stall. An oddly dandy sort of man with his hair combed back and a neat mustache decorating his upper lip was clapping his hands to attract customers. He seemed kind of fishy. He was the type that Nana didn't really want to become acquainted with, and she normally would have declined involvement, even just as a customer going to a street vendor. She wasn't all that hung up on something as childish as target shooting in the first place.

But she couldn't look away from that street stall. Some invisible power, like a curse or a spell, was cast on her, and it was as if her eyes were nailed on one spot. Their lineup of miscellaneous and trashy items—a lighter with a garish design, a foreign-made rubber bottle, figures of very scantily clad anime characters, all sorts of candy, plushes of local mascots that seemed like not official merch based on their shoddy sewing—was lit up under the kind of lighting you'd expect. And then, sitting conspicuously as a prize item at the target shooting, was what was most likely the main draw.

It was wrapped in newspaper, with warm steam puffing off it. It was cooked just right, looking like the skin would come right off if you touched it, its golden insides peeking out from between the cracks where the skin peeled off. It made you hungry just from looking at it.

It was a baked sweet potato. She looked away, then back again, and even after closing her eyes for ten seconds and slowly opening her eyes, all that she could see was the baked potato.

It had happened when she was maybe ten years old, at most. She had run into a baked potato shop that had been struggling due to the owner's age and on the verge of closing—so the people buying sweet potatoes there had been discussing. Between the smell and the way they looked, the sweet potatoes had really stirred up her appetite, but Nana hadn't had enough money on hand to buy one, since she was only a little kid. She'd had no choice but to just look on enviously as a wizened old man had turned on the flames, and housewives and high school girls had gleefully picked out sweet potatoes. Nana had never encountered that baked potato stall since. He must have retired, exactly like she'd heard.

The baked potato that was displayed on the target shooting stall now looked just like the shining baked potatoes she had seen back then. The succulent sweet potato made her hungry simply looking at it. It would surely be delicious to eat. It couldn't possibly taste anything but delicious.

The sound of her swallowing her drool rang through her body. She'd apparently done it unconsciously.

"What's the matter?"

Shizuku was looking at Nana with a smile. That smile clouding with worry was…picturesque in its own way, but Nana didn't want to see that right now. She wanted Shizuku to have a smile on during the festival.

Nana hid her anxiety with a smile. "No, there's nothing the matter."

"Are you cold, or something?"

"I'm all right. Since your hands are warm."

"I'm glad."

"Yes, indeed…oh, look at that branch over there. It's blooming so beautifully." Nana came to a stop and pointed at a branch where the flowers were in perfect bloom, but didn't look up at it, eyes swiftly checking all around.

The passersby were looking at the shops, chatting pleasantly, eyes not stopping on the target shooting stall as they walked along. They weren't reacting at all to the sight of this strange target shooting stall with a baked potato on display. They didn't stop or tug on their companions' sleeves or whisper something about the strange shop over there.

"Where? Which branch?" Shizuku asked Nana.

"Look, it's right over there."

Nana bought time to linger as she observed even more closely. The people weren't looking, and the stall vendor wasn't really showing it off, either. Despite having such a unique item there in the spot where it would stand out most, there was no poster for it. All that was written on the sign was "target shooting." There were no further details. All the target shooting places she'd seen before had advertised some unique item to draw in customers. That's what you would do, if you had any interest in making sales.

That sweet potato looked very good and was perfect as an item to draw in customers—

"I can't tell," said Shizuku. "Is it that branch over there?"

"No, no."

Nana was suddenly struck by doubt. The sweet potato appeared to have enticing steam rising from it. She could tell that it was freshly baked; if she stuffed it into her cheeks, taking care not to get burned from the heat, it would certainly be delicious.

But wasn't that strange? Just how long could it remain freshly baked? A fair amount of time should have passed since she had first found that potato. But the steam rising from it had not faded at all.

The season was spring. It was cold enough out that you needed a coat to go out for a walk, and the air was dry enough that you needed to keep some moisturizer on you. At night, your breath would turn white, and if she hadn't been holding hands with Shizuku, her fingers would go numb. In that kind of weather, just how long could a potato stay warm, puffing up white steam to draw people's attention?

While pointing at the branch, Nana spent some time considering how suspicious it was that the baked potato retained its warmth, before reaching what she figured was the right conclusion. This was…a hallucination brought on by calorie restriction.

Nana had been on a diet for a few days now. She was going for both moderate exercise and calorie restriction in order to lose a little bit of weight. It was of the mild sort—stopping snacking, reducing the amount of white rice in her bowl, just things like that.

But it wasn't as if this wasn't difficult. In particular, coming to an event like a festival, where there were tasty things lined up all over the place—buttered potatoes, *mitarashi* dango, tri-color dango, *takoyaki,* candied apples, fish and chips, *okonomiyaki,* beef skewers, fried chicken, *yakisoba,* frankfurters, chocolate bananas, kebabs, *obanyaki,* fried chocolate sweets, ramen, french fries, and other various desires that excited her—having to walk right through the middle of that temptation was torture.

She had known before coming that this place would be bad for her mind and body, but imagining herself and Shizuku strolling together holding hands underneath the lit-up cherry blossom trees, she hadn't been able to restrain herself. This was a once-in-a-year chance, the first since they had become lovers, and she absolutely didn't want to let it slip through her fingers. She fought off her appetite all the time, on a regular basis. That would be no big deal—theoretically. Or so she had thought.

"Pardon me, it seems I was mistaken. Never mind the flowers—let's move on." Nana squeezed Shizuku's hand and pulled. It was dangerous to stay here any longer.

"Come on, now, it's dangerous to go too fast," Shizuku said with a smile.

Nana gave her a distracted reply and hurried onward. She'd never imagined that she'd be so unable to restrain her desire for food that she would hallucinate. The baked potato had looked so good that if it hadn't been a hallucination, she would have loved to get a hold of it no matter what to take a big bite. It had looked good enough to make her think that the baked potato from her childhood had come back.

With anxiety about her mental state for having such a vision, Nana pushed her way through the crowds at a trot.

◇ Ayana Sakanagi

"You want to do target shooting? Aren't you still a little young for that, Ayana?"

She nodded to the question of if she wanted to do target shooting and shook her head at the question of whether she was too young, a gentle attempt to hold her back. Ayana's mother knew she was stubborn at times like these, and she felt that a target shooting stall at night wasn't bad enough that she would drag her away to stop her. She'd given Ayana the right on festival night to "get one thing you like per night." But until now, she hadn't exercised it even once.

"If you miss, you won't get anything, you know? Are you all right with that?"

"Don't you worry about that, ma'am. There's a consolation prize if you miss everything," the stall vendor interjected glibly.

Her mother gave a forced smile in response, then squatted down and met Ayana's gaze at her level. "Are you really okay with that?"

Ayana nodded silently. All the stalls before had only ever had very ordinary things. There had been magical girl toys, and not just *takoyaki* and chocolate-covered bananas, but they had all been somewhat lacking, and she hadn't encountered anything that struck her. It had been disappointing, but she hadn't been upset. What Ayana wanted was princess-related goods. That wasn't something you ran into so easily. But now she had found something.

"It doesn't really seem like she could do it, though," said her mother.

"No, no, it's fine. I'll get a step stool," said the stall vendor.

"I'm so sorry."

Ayana had three bullets. A princess would never be fine with missing the first two shots, and neither would one who served her. She would get it in one shot. Ayana raised the gun and shifted her gaze to the item she was after. Squinting one eye, she carefully fixed her aim, trying to lean forward as far as she could, but at this rate, it seemed like she would fall into the booth.

"Ma'am, hold her steady."

"Sure, sure."

Now she had a firm support. Feeling a sense of security in the warmth from her mother's palm, she raised her gun once more. She was after just one thing. It was the crown displayed at the top of the shelf in the middle, right in the position worthy of being called the princess's seat. When she was in preschool, she'd seen a princess of a foreign country in a parade for some sort of commemorative event. This looked exactly like the crown the princess had had on her head then. It had an octagonally cut purple gem that reflected the light. Was that particularly large one a diamond? The gorgeous crown had the power to convince Ayana that princesses weren't just in stories—they were real. She'd admired princesses ever since then, as a clear goal—to serve a princess. No, if she had that crown, then maybe she should become a princess herself.

Ayana pointed her gun at the crown and carefully fixed her aim—then placed the gun to the side.

She looked at the crown. She *had* longed for it. She thought she still did now. A real princess had put that on her head to wave her hand from her seat on top of a car. Yes, it had been a real princess. It was no fake, nor a prop.

Ayana considered. That had been the first time she'd seen a real princess. But it wasn't as if that had been the first and last time. Ayana served a princess right now, as a magical girl. Ruler was a real princess. And she didn't have a crown on her head, but a little tiara. Even if it was small, it shone like the real thing. It sparkled in the dusty Ouketsuji temple. Seeing it made Swim Swim very happy and made her remember that she was serving a princess.

A crown. A tiara. Both were pretty. Which was more pretty? Ayana considered and couldn't decide. What was it that she needed? If she could acquire a crown, then would she be able to become a princess? No, not at all. The path to being a princess was painful and steep. It wasn't as if she could become one right away, just because she'd acquired one item. And besides, the more she looked at it, the more she thought back, Ruler's tiara was better. Ruler was not just a princess. She was the number one princess. A princess *and* a magical girl.

Ayana blinked her eyes, took the gun in hand, and readied it. Breathing in and out two or three times settled her heart. She shot down a *Cutie Healer* phone case, a *Star Queen* mouse pad, and a *Magical Daisy* blanket one after another, and then a beat later, her mother and the stall vendor cried out in surprise.

"That's amazing, Ayana. You have a talent for this."

"That's pretty good. You were like a Tohoku hunter with prey in front of them, or a sniper aiming for a target."

Ayana didn't look at the two as they praised her—her eyes were up on the crown. She had almost taken the wrong path. *Ruler really is the princess, and the princess is Ruler,* she pondered silently.

◇ Tsubame Murota

They'd had a real fight. Shouichi had insisted that a pregnant woman absolutely shouldn't be going to a festival: "What if something happened in the crowds?"

Tsubame kept repeating the same lines over and over again like a child: "What's the point of living if I can't go to this once-a-year Spring Festival?" "I'm not even showing yet—before I know it, I'll be too big to do stuff like this," "You can protect me if something happens," "I just want to go, I really want to go." In the end, Shouichi gave in. When husband and wife clashed, the win rate was about forty-sixty in Shouichi's favor, but Tsubame had pushed hard for this one.

"It's okay for me to enjoy the crowds from time to time, right?" Tsubame said.

"Agh…you really do love festivals and things like that," Shouichi replied. "But they have them every year."

"Giving me that look again! C'mon, c'mon, it's the big festival, so let's have fun with it."

Shouichi didn't like noisy situations. Crowds weren't his thing, and he was a disagreeable guy who wasn't ashamed to say that the stalls and the people involved were all of the dubious sorts. But when he actually went out, he could enjoy himself decently enough. He looked at the cherry blossoms with kind eyes. And the way he nonchalantly helped Tsubame with steps, vehicles, crowds, and other various dangers was kind and made her happy. He'd be shy if she said this out loud, so she accepted his kindness silently. The two of them went down the cherry blossom–lined street, and right when they were just about at the west square, where most of the trees were, Shouichi stopped. Wondering what it was, she saw that he was looking intently at a street stall.

"What's up? Did ya find something nice?" Tsubame asked.

"Oh, yeah," Shouichi answered half-heartedly as he stared at the stall.

It looked like a target shooting stall. There were various prizes lined up on the usual three levels of shelving, where you won a prize by knocking it down with a cork gun. Shouichi hated gambling, even if it was just a little bit for fun. Normally, he would never even look at target shooting. So then was there a really attractive prize there? Tsubame looked over at the shelf with prizes lined up on it and groaned quietly.

Oh, that's *what he wants.*

It had been when she had still been young, years ago, at the time when she'd been saying she wanted hers to be the fastest team in N City. There had been this anime that Tsubame had loved to watch. It had been about a little witch riding a broom that flew through the air, her even smaller familiar in tow, flying in a journey from town to town. The action astride a broomstick, and the sense of immediacy and speed the show had had was still much talked about. It was no overstatement to say that show was the reason Tsubame had first begun dreaming of speed.

Displayed on that spot, in a basket, was a plushie that looked just like the girl's bat familiar, Cocker. It was an extremely accurate replica in a basket that looked like it was worth more than the plush itself, giving it a sense of respect to the original anime. It was all about the little things.

Shouichi had been with her ever since she was small. In other words, he knew about the anime Tsubame liked. That had to be why he was trying to get the plushie for her.

What a loving husband, she thought as she wiped the corners of her eyes with her wrist. Then she jabbed Shouichi's side with her elbow. "Hey, Shou-Bro. Want that over there?"

"I told you not to call me that in public."

"C'mon, do you want it or not?"

Shouichi's eyes moved restlessly behind his glasses before he gave a little resigned nod. "If you have to ask, then…I…do want it."

"Ohhh. Oh-ho-ho. So a big stuffy public servant wants a plushie, eh?"

"Huh? A plushie? Oh, right, there is a plushie. It's one of the prizes. Of course it's a plushie. It looked so realistic, I thought it was the real thing."

"Ha-ha-ha! It's cuter than the real thing."

"You think it's cute? Doesn't it look more, like…tasty?"

"Huh? Tasty? …Have you eaten one before?"

After taking a breath, Shouichi nodded. "That thing looks exactly like what they had at this one restaurant back when I was in school. I ate those a lot."

It took Tsubame a few seconds to understand what he was saying. She understood the meaning of his words, but couldn't figure out what he was trying to express.

"Hold on a sec," she said. "Huh? Whaddaya mean?"

"What? I mean just what I said."

"Uh…huh? Hang on…you're for real?"

"You know I went to college in S Prefecture, right? It's a regional specialty there. You can fry them thin, but I like them grilled without seasoning. I hear you can't really get ahold of them recently, and they're often not on the menu at *izakayas* and small eateries," Shouichi said with his usual super-serious expression as he gazed at the target shooting prizes. He didn't seem to be joking.

The man who ran the stall was stroking his mustache with his right hand as he looked between the two of them, smiling brightly.

"Hey there, we have some nice items lined up," he told them. "Come one, come all."

Tsubame turned back, checking Shouichi over her shoulder. He had his hand on his chin in contemplation. It seemed he was considering whether he should play the shooting game. Tsubame shivered and drew her collar in. She didn't want to see a plushie filled with memories and be reminded of a flavor.

Tsubame tugged at Shouichi's sleeve. "Hey, let's forget about it and go somewhere else. C'mon."

"But…"

"Seriously. It's just a plushie. It's not like you can actually eat it."

"Hmm… It honestly does look like a real bat, though. You're sure it's a plushie?"

"Of course I am."

"But I can practically taste it…"

"Urk… TMI! Don't make me imagine it!"

Any more of this would be dangerous. This was bad for the baby. Tsubame circled around to Shouichi's other side and pushed him. He hesitated, but gradually moved away from the target shooting stall.

"Oh yeah, let's buy some later at the supermarket," Shouichi said.

"Huh…? You think…they sell it?"

"You should have some, too. They're nutritious."

"Uh, sorry, even if it is, I can't…"

"I think practically everyone eats it."

"No, they don't. That's really wild. Just what I'd expect from my husband."

Recalling that Shouichi had enough nerve to propose marriage to her, her respect for her husband was renewed. At the same time, she was satisfied at having kept her childhood memories safe. While saying farewell in her heart to the bat plush, she pushed Shouichi's back and left the street stall.

◇ Yuna Amasato

On the twelfth shot, the bullet that made it a thousand six hundred yen in cash was knocked away to roll on the ground. Now that things were at this point, Yuna looked back on what they'd just done. First, she and Mina had spent four hundred yen. They'd quarreled about who would shoot then, and because they'd been snatching the gun from each other while trying to fire, they'd failed to hit the target. Then, when they'd paid another four hundred yen, Mina had won at rock-paper-scissors and so had shot, and though she'd hit the target twice, it hadn't fallen. Having been watching and doing nothing herself after paying four hundred yen, Yuna finally got her chance to hold the gun, and though she hit two out of three shots, she still failed to knock it down. Thinking *enough of this,* she'd slammed down four hundred yen, and Mina shot once while Yuna shot another, and despite both hitting it, the target had not budged.

“Mister, can we have a little time to strategize?” Yuna signaled a time-out with her hands.

“Yeah, so long as you’re coming back, take all the time you like.”

And so the twins left the stall and went to hide behind a tree. Though the Spring Festival was famous for its lights at night, there were still places where the light didn’t reach. In the darkness, the shadows lay thick over two identical faces as they leaned close to each other, and the twins exchanged a whispered conversation.

“Are you getting déjà vu? I feel like we’ve had a similar experience before,” Yuna said to Mina.

“This is just like that time when we kept on buying raffle tickets over and over to win a video game. We wound up stuck taking home a whole bunch of weird keychains and made Mom so mad.”

“If this is the same sort of thing…then that prize isn’t gonna fall over, is it?”

“This game might even be worse than mobile gacha games ’cause here you can win a real gift… Should we call it quits?”

“No way, we already paid sixteen hundred yen. You could have a tea party with that much money.”

“That’s just what I wanted to hear. I’m not giving up.”

“You got some kinda plan?”

“We have one more bullet left, right? If I transform into this bullet, and you fire me…”

“Ohhh! That sounds like it’d work! I knew you’d figure it out, sis! Magi-cool!”

Mina transformed into Minael, and then Minael turned into the cork bullet, and Yuna returned to the target shooting stall with the Minael cork bullet and the toy rifle.

“Hey, welcome back,” said the stall vendor. “…Huh? Weren’t there two of you who looked the same? Did one of you leave?”

“We fused,” said Yuna.

“Ah, yeah, I guess that happens sometimes.”

“Heh-heh. Now that we’re powered up, we’ll show you what we’ve got.”

Yuna shouldered the gun, more relaxed than ever before. There was no need for her to get tense. Her big sister would handle everything.

“Here we go,” she said quietly to the gun and pulled the trigger.

The high-speed cork bullet flew out way faster, tens of times faster than before, shooting straight into the target with more mass and energy than appearances would show—only to easily plink away and fall on the ground.

"…Huh?"

"Oh, too bad. Come try again later."

With the candy he pressed into her palm in hand, Yuna wobbled back to their spot behind the tree.

Mina was already there, and Yuna grabbed her. "Hey, sis! The heck was that?!"

"I don't get it… I just don't get it," said Mina. "It's just, I dunno —I can't hit it right."

Seeing her sister so confused made Yuna release her grip. If she was going to come up with an excuse or something, she would have said something a little more plausible. Then had something she honestly "didn't get" just happened? The two of them tilted their heads and looked at each other.

"Just what is going on here?" Mina wondered.

"Hmm…maybe…," Yuna began.

"Maybe?"

"Your conscience got in the way, for using your magical girl power to try to steal the prize?"

"Ah, that could be it. 'Cause, y'know, we're such good people."

"You're so magi-cool, sis."

"Maybe it could also be that my pride as a magical girl wouldn't allow it."

"You're so magi-cool, sis."

"It is what it is… Guess we're giving up on this one. But it's frustrating, when this was a rare chance to get the nostalgic *Magical Quest* first run special bonus version. Hey, remember how you wanted that so bad that you spun around on the floor of the toy shop like you were breakdancing? But Mom still wouldn't buy it for us."

"Huh? What're you talking about? That's not what was up there. They had the *Fantasy Snack senbei* flavor that you loved back in elementary school. They stopped selling 'em because they were so unpopular."

"Huh?"

"Huhhh?"

The twins argued as they walked along, but when they found a stall that said *Direct Flight to the Amazon! Piranha Scooping!* they put that on pause and rushed off together, laughing brightly to each other as they scooped for the dubious freshwater fish that they were calling piranhas.

◇ **Tama Inubouzaki**

Tama glanced up at the cherry blossom trees and their lights as she walked down the way. The beautiful pink seemed to go on forever. Despite feeling moved, Tama avoided looking closely at the trees, making a conscious effort to look away and pay attention as she walked. She had a tendency to zone out to begin with, and her mother had warned her that if she walked with her eyes up, she would definitely fall, bump into something, or get her wallet stolen. Just imagining those possible outcomes made her shiver. So Tama simply glanced at the cherry blossoms.

If there had been someone there to help the inattentive Tama, then she would have been able to examine the cherry blossoms more closely. She'd always attended the Spring Festival with her grandmother until last year. Everything then had been nice and fun—with pretty cherry blossoms, delicious dango, and her grandmother smiling happily. Seeing her grandmother like that, Tama had enjoyed herself, too.

Now her grandmother was in the hospital. She couldn't come with Tama. That really made things a lot less nice and fun. Her mother and father were too busy to give Tama attention. And it had been years since her younger brother and sister had started going to the festival with their own friends. Tama had no friends who would go to the Spring Festival with her. Everyone Tama knew would either laugh at her, or find her a drag, or both. But then, someone she didn't know might be a very bad person, and she didn't want that, either. That was why she had to keep a watch on everything around her as she strolled along, and it made things a lot less fun.

But that didn't mean that she shouldn't go to the Spring Festival. She'd decided when her grandmother had gone to the hospital that she would go to the shrine at the far end of the festival grounds, throw in an offering, and wish for her grandma to feel better. And she'd gone and done that without any issue—but she didn't quite want to go home yet. Tama loved cherry blossoms and festivals. Part of her did figure that it would have been safer to have gone during the day, instead of at night. But her grandmother loved cherry blossoms at night. Her parents were hard to please. “They’re just lit by artificial lights,” they said, “and it looks cheap.” But Tama still couldn’t bring herself to dislike the nighttime cherry blossoms her grandmother loved.

The rows of cherry blossom trees seemed like they would go on forever, but then they started coming more sporadically, telling her that the tress as well as the stall-lined way were soon coming to an end. Tama put a hand into her skirt pocket and jangled the change there. Her allowance for the Spring Festival from her mother was less than what her grandmother had used to give her. She wanted to make sure she didn’t regret how she spent it, if she could.

Turning back along the tree-lined way, with her attention more on the stalls around her than on the trees, she made her way along. Sniffing to try to find the exact right thing among the delicious smells that wafted around, she almost overlooked something that’d passed by in the corner of her eye. Her eyes jerked back for another look. Displayed in the highest spot of a target shooting stall, right in the middle, was a plastic spade.

It looked just like the one she had used in the sandbox in preschool. The color, shape, everything about it was similar. It was lit up so brightly, it looked dazzling. She was definitely not mistaking it because of the dark.

Back when she’d been going to the sandbox with that spade, every day had been fun. She hadn’t had people getting angry at her so much, and she’d had lots of friends who had treated her as equals. Even when she’d made mistakes, she’d been forgiven with a “What can you do?” and she’d been praised just for digging big holes. She’d even felt that so long as she had that, she could do anything.

Standing a little ways from the street stalls, she closely examined the spade. The more she looked at it, the more it resembled that same one. Her sister had taken the spade away to dig potatoes, and it had broken in the middle. Tama had cried for the whole day, but her trowel wasn’t coming back. Or so she had thought. But now it was right there. She clasped the change in her pocket. It was valuable wealth. She had never managed to win a prize from target shooting or ring-throwing before. But that was then. Today, it might go well. No, it should definitely go well today.

Even with the trowel, it wasn’t as if those fun times would come back. Tama understood that. But if she looked at it, she could remember her fun times. She knew it was very enjoyable to remember good times. Like in the game she was playing now, *Magical Girl Raising Project*, looking at the rare items she had acquired and remembering things was the next best thing to actually playing the game.

Fixing her gaze on the trowel, she clasped her change. She steeled herself and was about to take a step forward when she bumped into something and wound up on her bottom. Since all she'd been looking at was the trowel, she had neglected paying attention to her surroundings. Rubbing her bottom and holding a hand over her nose, she lifted her chin and looked up. There was a large shadow looking down at Tama, the lights that were pointed at the flowers at their back. Her vision gradually cleared, and the person looking down on her became visible. It was a high school boy who had to be two or three years older than she was. From the glob of whipped cream on his chest and the crushed crepe in his hand, she could tell what this was about.

"Hey! What're you gonna do about this?" he barked at her.

And now Tama realized—she had bumped into him, and the whipped cream from the crepe had gotten all over his shirt. And even if he asked her what she was gonna do about it, there was nothing she could do. She didn't know what she should do, either. And his face was scary. The boys in her class were scary, but he was even scarier. Though he couldn't be more than three or four years older, he already looked like an adult.

He seemed angry: His eyebrows were raised, and his lips were pulled in a tight line. But Tama couldn't do anything about that. Unable to apologize or make excuses, she dithered, and the high school boy grabbed her upper arm, clasping it hard. It hurt.

He made her get to her feet. She felt like she was going to fall. If Tama had been the magical girl from *Magical Girl Raising Project*, then surely she would be able to do something. But Tama was just Tama, and of course she was not a magical girl.

"Hey. You listening to me?"

Something popped up in front of Tama. The voice of the high school boy grew distant. When she lifted her head, she saw a person standing between her and the high school boy. Their long black hair reflected the lights that shone on the cherry blossoms. The high school boy threatened them, saying "Butt out! Mind your own business!” The person protecting Tama appeared to be a high school–aged girl—in fact, this girl wore a local school uniform, so she was definitely a high schooler. And she was tall, only a little bit shorter than the scary-looking high school boy.

The girl gave a sharp click of her tongue and squeezed the arm that had extended toward her, and the high school boy gave a little groan under his breath. The two of them continued to glare at each other until the high school boy swung his fist, and the girl’s leg moved from some angle that Tama couldn’t see. By the time Tama was thinking *Ahh!* the high school boy was falling forward into the girl’s arms as her uniform skirt fluttered back down into position.

The girl slung the heavy-looking high school boy over her shoulder like he was nothing, then went to place him sitting down against a tree and walked off in the opposite direction. With a thanks to the stall vendor who asked with concern if she was okay, Tama followed the high school girl and happened to look up. Entranced by the beautifully lit cherry blossoms, she caught her foot on a *yakisoba* stand’s cord, and she fell dramatically.

◇ Kano Sazanami

She hadn’t meant to bother sticking her nose into that quarrel. Kano thought of herself as generally cool-headed. She considered herself apathetic, too. She wasn’t so bad that she would mentally sneer at people who were really earnest about things, but she couldn’t bring herself to invest herself in something fervently.

But even so, sometimes she slipped and wound up getting physical. She hadn’t been able to leave that girl alone.

While walking, Kano clicked her tongue quietly. Cherry blossom petals fell on her head, and she immediately brushed them off.

That had been the wrong way to save her. She thought she’d decided once she started high school that she would avoid resolving things with violence as much as possible, but she’d been grabbing that guy’s arm before she knew it. And with Kano’s grip strength, that was violence. Plus, the nasty thing was that she was aware of what she was doing. As for what had happened after that, it had been nothing other than violence, no matter what angle she looked at it from. Just how far would the excuse that “When I saw them swing up their fist, my leg moved on its own and I kicked him in the jaw" go in court? She wasn't about to find out.

She pushed her way through the crowds without looking at the cherry blossoms or the street stalls, trudging along as a thought struck her. Why did she ever come to this festival? There was nothing fun about coming to a place like this when she was tired after her part-time job. She wasn't enjoying it with someone else. Seeing the cherry blossoms, she did think they were pretty, but she didn't have to see those in person—she could see the same thing on TV or online. She didn't even like crowds in the first place.

She'd heard the rumors that your feet would just take you to N City's Spring Festival. But that nonsense didn't even count as occult—it was just a tactic to get people to come. But somehow, Kano actually was here at the festival. And though she had been playing *Magical Girl Raising Project* a lot lately, for some reason, she hadn't been able to bring herself to play it that day. Was this really an occult thing?

A woman in a sports jersey being dragged by two people who seemed like her parents passed by. She heard a voice saying, "But I hate crowds." It seemed that Kano wasn't the only one to have come even though she didn't like crowds, but they were being dragged here, so that wasn't really comparable.

Besides, she had her parents. Kano had no parents. She had no one.

Kano hurried up. She really shouldn't have come. There had been no need to save that girl just now, either. Even if Kano hadn't done anything, the man from the nearby stall—the kind-looking target shooting vendor—would have helped her out. Kano had gone too far and brought about unnecessary ill feelings—she couldn't have been more wrong, calling herself cool-headed.

She shouldn't have come. Nothing but negative feelings filled her head. Nothing good had come of coming. She practically fled, walking away. There wasn't anything she wanted, and nothing she wanted to do—she lifted her gaze. After having looked only at the ground, now she was met with the sight of happy people.

It wasn't that there was nothing she wanted. Yeah. She remembered. At the target shooting before, she'd stopped because there had been something she wanted. Kano relaxed her pace just a bit until she was at the same speed as everyone else.

What should she do? Should she go back to where she'd been just now? Even if it hadn't caused a commotion, she couldn't help but feel like it wasn't a very wise choice to return to the scene of violence she'd caused. But she wanted that thing she'd just seen.

Kano pondered for a while before reaching a conclusion. She circled around behind the stall-lined path, hid behind a tree, then stripped off her parka and turned it inside out. This parka was reversible—two different colors. She hid her hair and face by pulling the hood over her head. This should basically be okay. Erasing the words *a criminal returning to the scene of a crime* from her head, Kano did a 180 degree turn and headed for the stall where she'd started that fight before.

There were no police there, nor any crowd of people, either. The high school boy was leaning against a cherry blossom tree, still unconscious. He was out like a light, so it should be a little while until he woke up. She would finish this before he woke up, and then she'd actually go home.

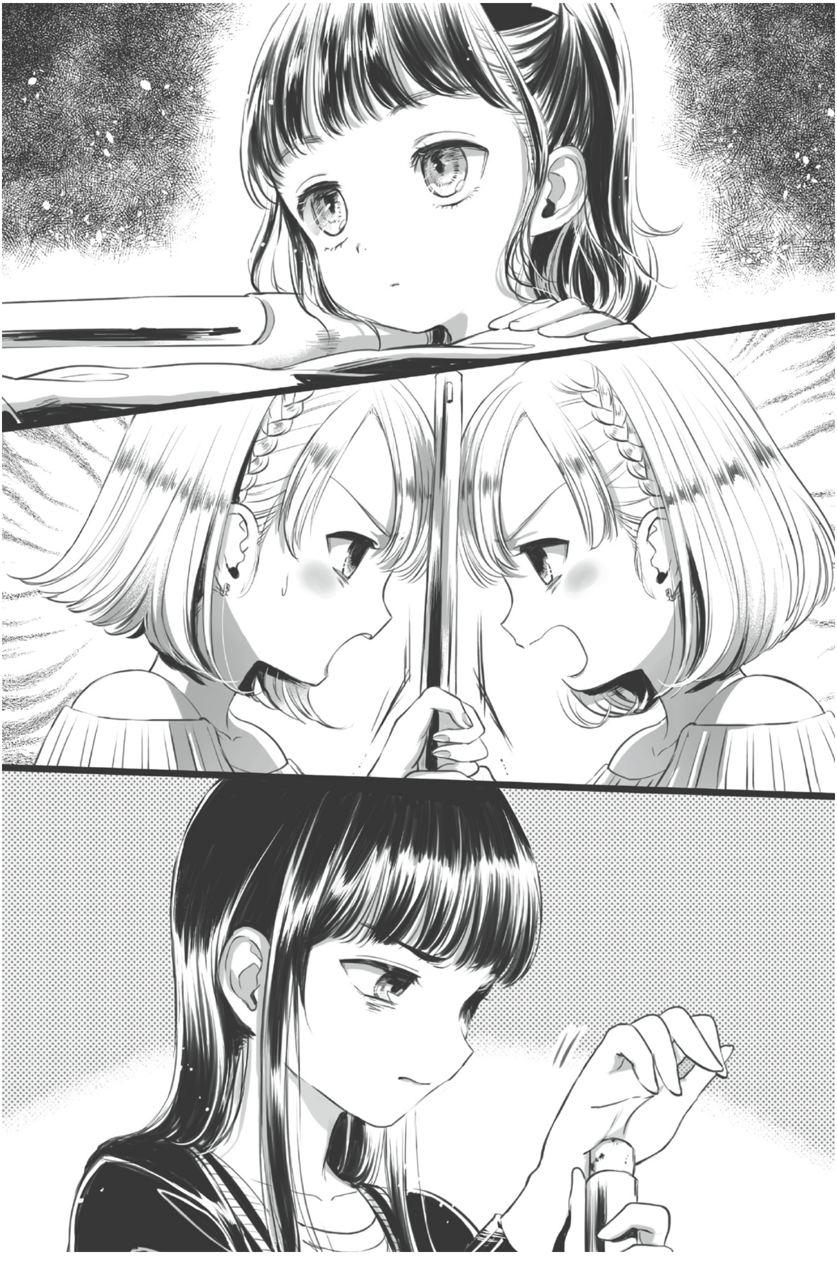
"I'd like one go," she told the stall vendor.

"Roger that."

The man at the stall handed her a toy gun and the cork bullets. Kano stuck a cork bullet down the barrel and raised it. She was aiming for just one item: The *Eight Transformations of Girl Ninja Machika* DVD box set in the middle of the top shelf.

It was a ninja story, unusual for a girl's anime that ran on Sunday mornings. The activities of the bungling Machika as she went to a ninja school had been a big hit among girls at the time. Back then, ninjas, angels, and fairies had been the same thing to Kano. She'd enjoyed the elementary school girls' prime-time block of *Machika* and *Daisy*.

Unlike more recent anime, which ended in just one or two cours, *Girl Ninja Machika* had spanned a hundred and twenty episodes. The DVD box set contained the entire series; it was large and thick and intimidating to look at.



Kano glared at the box set, but her expression relaxed for a moment. Back in the days when she'd watched that show with a smile, she felt like she had never glared at people or things like that. She only vaguely remembered her father, but she remembered imitating Machika with a toy katana, and then him acting out realistic death throes that made her freak out and run off. Though she only recalled her father hazily, it was all the weird stuff that she remembered.

Kano let out a little breath, then tightened up her expression once more. She wasn't so well-off that she would pay money to indulge in memories. She needed money, and if she carved out more to spend, she'd be left with hardly any cash to use on her hobbies. But she did want it, if she could get it. And if she could win it in target shooting, nothing would make her happier. She'd give it all she had.

She aimed her shot. Her hood was in the way, so she took off her parka, wrapped it around her waist, and pushed back her hair. Machika was a useless ninja who did nothing but screw up and was bad at throwing shuriken, too. She was different from Kano, who had never failed to get top grades in gym class. She was too old to be projecting herself onto anime characters anyway. Coolly fixing her aim, she pulled the trigger.

The cork was repelled with a *plink*. The second and third shots were repelled in the same way.

Kano clasped the gun tightly and lay herself facedown at the stall. There was no way a cork bullet would work on a big, heavy DVD box. Why hadn't she realized that before firing?

"Aw, that's too bad. Here's your consolation prize."

Four hundred yen for a candy. That wasn't worth it. When she sighed and turned around, she met the gaze of the high school boy as he was trying to stand up. Before Kano could say anything, he stood up, gave her a frightened look, then speed-walked off. Kano sighed again. She was just glad it hadn't turned into an issue.

She hadn't gotten anything. She had lost something. Four hundred yen. She should look at this positively and be glad this was the worst she'd gotten hurt. Time to go straight home. She was about to take a step when she started kicking something and hastily stopped her leg.

It was a girl of about middle school age. She had both hands on her knees, her shoulders heaving. Kano thought she'd seen her somewhere—then it struck her. It was the girl she'd just saved.

"Um…thank you so much for before! You were…um, r-really cool," was all the girl said before dashing off.

Kano watched her grow distant and casually touched her cheek. It was warm, even though she hadn't been running.

◇ Naoko Yamamoto

It had been a while since she'd been out walking for this long without transforming into Calamity Mary. It wasn't like it was fun, but neither was it painful and sad. It just made her get more drunk. That was all.

Her gaze happened to land on a target shooting booth lined with old-looking prizes. The prize in the most eye-catching spot was particularly old—something that kids these days would never be glad to get. Only hard-core fans would be happy to get a transformation set for a magical-girl anime that had run over a dozen years ago. Kids now would be into *Cutie Healer* or *Magical Daisy* or whatnot.

Naoko tilted her can and poured her beer to the back of her throat. Right now, she was a high-earner. She didn't have to drink cheap alcohol that made her feel sick anymore. This wasn't some cheapo beer—she had enough disposable income to go for actual beer, the expensive imported stuff, and to drink it without flinching. She was shameless enough not to be bothered by the eyes of others and had the serenity to ignore anything wrong with her health.

Eyes fixed on the Rikkabelle transformation set that sat in the middle of the crowd of prizes, Naoko tilted back her can once more, but all that came out was droplets. She crushed the aluminum can in her fist and tossed it into a wastebasket, then cracked open a bottle of whiskey. That was just beer, after all—something to drink in between other, harder stuff, to get drunk faster. With the amber liquid dripping from the corner of her mouth, she gulped. It didn't even taste good to her anymore.

The magical-girl anime *Rikkabelle*, which had been broadcast when Naoko was young, had introduced a variety of experimental elements to differentiate it from the magical girls that had come before. Of those, what had really enchanted Naoko the most had been Rikkabelle's personality.

In human form, she wore short-shorts, long T-shirts, and jumpers—as you could tell from this plain clothing, Rikkabelle liked to be active. Or more like, her body would get going before her brain did. Maybe they'd wanted to give the impression that she was boyish or sporty, but what viewers had gotten was that she was "rough," "wild," and "violent," and she'd been made a scapegoat by PTAs more than once or twice.

But Naoko had liked that. Rikkabelle had gotten herself out of situations by means of direct violence—something prior magical girls, with their fixation on flowers, friendship, kindness, love, and other boring empty catchphrases had lacked. Sick of crushing reality, Naoko had been attracted to that clear-cut, stress-free method of resolution, and once *Rikkabelle* was getting trashed by society, she'd started watching it on TV in secret, hiding it from her parents.

A few years back, she'd showed her own daughter the *Rikkabelle* DVDs. It had only been because that was the only kids' anime she could recall. Since becoming a magical girl, Naoko had learned more about it, but at the time, Naoko hadn't even known of the existence of *Star Queen*, *Cutie Healer*, or *Magical Daisy*. Thinking about what a kid would like or what was popular or whatever had been too much trouble. So she'd shoved those borrowed DVDs at her brat, thinking to save herself some hassle, and figured she'd punish her if she complained, but she'd been okay with it, surprisingly. Her daughter had kept herself from crying out in enjoyment of Rikkabelle's adventures, but she hadn't been able to hide her excitement. Naoko remembered snorting over that.

She had started clamming up since she'd get hit if she made too much noise. Naoko wouldn't really call this DVD set full of memories or anything, but she was remembering it, for some reason—even though it wasn't fun, and it didn't give her pleasure.

Naoko tilted back the bottle of whiskey. She'd meant to drink it while enjoying the flowers, but she'd hardly looked at the flowers at all. Now all she was looking at were the target shooting prizes and the scenes of the past. Wiping the whiskey that dripped from her mouth with her right index finger, she locked eyes with the mustached stall vendor. He had a sort of frightened, polite smile on his face. Maybe a middle-aged woman continuing to drink booze in front of his tall was scary, in a way. It was rather fresh to have someone scared of her, even when she wasn't transformed into Calamity Mary.

"I'll do it."

"All right, that'll be four hundred yen."

She stuck the cork into the gun and raised it. The barrel wavered. It was different from when she was Calamity Mary.

Naoko looked at the package of the transformation set. A happy girl was wearing the Rikkabelle costume. It had to be an old toy, but it was strangely not faded, like a new item. Even though the picture looked nothing like her, Naoko saw her daughter in it. Her gun barrel stopped trembling, and she fixed it precisely on the target. She fired the first shot. It was a clean hit, but it bounced away. She fired the second shot. This also hit the target, only to bounce away. The third cork similarly bounced off the box to fall on the floor. "Aw, that's too bad," the mustached vendor said with a forced smile as he hastily picked it up. He shoved the candy consolation prize at Naoko, and that was it.

This was not an unforeseen conclusion for Naoko. She had lived nearly forty years. She was aware, at least, that festival hawkers weren't doing aboveboard and honest business. Any of the stalls would have junk food filled with lots of preservatives that were bad for your health, raffles that had no winning tickets, shape-cutting games with shapes that would break right away, chicks dyed different colors that were all sickly, and things of that nature, and Naoko wasn't about to complain about those now. A major prize to draw customers at a target shooting booth not budging when the cork hit it, she'd seen plenty of times before.

She could bring up the name of the Tetsuwa-kai. If she showed off the metal badge with their yakuza coat of arms that she'd stolen for fun, the vendor would surely tremble in fear and offer her a special deal. She could transform into Calamity Mary and break one of the pillars of the stall with a kick, and he would run off with a shriek, leaving his prizes behind. If he still resisted, then she could punch or kick him, using whatever means she could to get what she wanted. Normally, she would have done as much without hesitation. She wouldn't even have tried to pay money and try it fair and square in the first place—she would have started with either sudden violence or threats.

But this was the one day she hadn't felt like that. Naoko accepted the candy and tossed it in her mouth. It was sickly sweet. She'd thought the same thing a long time ago, sucking on a candy that tasted just like this. She even recalled seeing her daughter seem to enjoy them so much and being impressed that she would suck on such a disgustingly sweet thing like it was good. No—this was less of a recollection; it had simply come to mind.

Naoko turned her back on the target shooting. Some kid might pester their parents for that transformation set. And no matter how many shots they fired, they wouldn't knock down the transformation set for them, and the kid would definitely throw a fit about how they wanted it. Parents these days were soft, so they might negotiate with the stall vendor. "I'll pay you such and such an amount, so couldn't you give that to us?" and the vendor would smirk with a "Very well" and accept the deal. The child would be innocently pleased to get the transformation set, while the not-so-innocent stall vendor watched them go, and the kid went home with a big smile on her face. Once she was at home, she'd transform into Rikkabelle. A fun family, a happy family—thinking this far, Naoko became aware she was drunk, and tipped her bottle back again.

◇ Makoto Andou

"Ooh, looks like you've made quite a lot of money, mister. I hear those hundred yen coins jingling."

"It's a big event that happens only once a year, so I gotta make a profit. And since you helped me out this time, Makoto…"

"I did?"

"Everyone was after that thing—men, women, people of all ages. I had my doubts when you said that it would look like whatever each customer wanted, but it was true."

"Well, yeah, that's how incredible it is."

"Some people saw food, one saw a doll… Only thing this old man saw was a prop gun, though."

"That is exactly what it is."

"Hmm? How come your voice changed just now?"

"Whoops. Sorry, it's a little tic of mine…"

"What kind of tic is that?"

"Anyway, let's celebrate. You already paid for your booth, right?"

"You're a bit young to be talking about stuff like that. The payment's basically a donation."

"Doesn't matter either way. C'mon, let's get going."

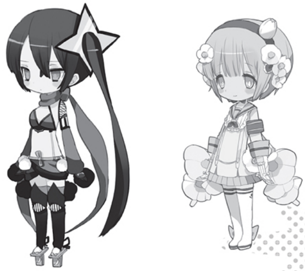
"Good grief, you're always champing at the bit… That reminds me, what did the prize item look like to you, Makoto?"

"That is a secret."

Makoto put a finger to her lips and flashed a crooked smile.

Snow White Raising Project

This story takes place right after the events of *Magical Girl Raising Project*.



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Snow White Raising Project

The magical girl Snow White made herself an outcast. After surviving the Musician of the Forest's final exam, she was both a victim of the incident and an accuser of its crimes—brutal bloodbaths.

Once the incident came to light, she was for a time seen as the hero who had indicted Cranberry, and she also garnered sympathy as a pitiful victim. But she had a very stubborn attitude about it, always brushing off any expressions of comfort and respect. Eventually, nobody—not even outsiders—tried associating with her.

But the Magical Kingdom did have to get involved with Snow White. They needed to be clear about how they dealt with her. They had to emphasize their sincerity toward the victims of the Cranberry incident, and prevent discontent and unease from spreading to other magical girls… At least, that was my belief. The Magical Kingdom often slapped a temporary bandage over any problem.

Soon, Snow White received unprecedented treatment: She was made an honorary citizen of the Magical Kingdom, which substantiated my beliefs even further. This was clearly bait.

Made to choose between continuing as a magical girl with this reception, or having her memories related to magical girls erased and return to society as a normal person, Snow White chose the former. The Magical Kingdom would have preferred, if possible, that she would quit. That would mean no future trouble and no hassles. Based on how Snow White had acted during her exam, there had certainly been the expectation that she would choose the latter. But Snow White had not abandoned being a magical girl.

The day I learned this news, I volunteered to be Snow White's mentor.

Snow White had never taken any legitimate exam or been properly mentored, and if she was going to become an honorary citizen of the Magical Kingdom, then somebody would have to educate her on how to become a respectable magical girl. It was a bit like training a new bride in the domestic arts.

I am not a product of Cranberry's exam system. I was selected as a magical girl through a legitimate exam. My residence was comparatively close to the region Snow White was in charge of. I was a veteran in a pretty good position, with a fair amount of free time. I also had a passable experience with the Magical Kingdom. That fulfilled the conditions for being a mentor. I was fairly sure that if I just volunteered for it, then I would be chosen.

And so I was chosen. I was the only one who volunteered to mentor Snow White. I was the only eccentric who actively wanted to get involved with her.

I was interested in Snow White. She was a strange girl—despite having experienced something that would not only disillusion her to magical girls, but make her despair of them, she was continuing to be one. Even knowing what had happened during Cranberry's final exam, all I could think was—why her? I could see the other survivor, Ripple, continuing on because she refused to give in, or because of her fighting spirit or that sort of mentality. And Ripple hadn't actually quit being a magical girl. But Snow White's decision still left a bad taste in my mouth.

That bothered me, hence why I volunteered my services. Having been chosen without any review, I immediately gave Snow White a call. I introduced myself, briefly mentioned my reason for calling—that I was now her mentor—and said, "Meeting face-to-face would be difficult due to time restraints, which is why I'll mainly be contacting you by phone." Then I finished with a standard insincere remark: "Do feel free to consult me if anything is troubling you."

Snow White's listless reply made it painfully clear that she really didn't want to be friendly with me. But I wanted to be friendly with her, so I tried a bit harder.

"Anything at all. Even the slightest concern or issue. When I was just starting out, I asked my predecessors for help with the littlest things."

"I see."

"So please don't hesitate to ask me questions. Not just about magical girls—it can be about school, or things at home. It can't be that absolutely everything is going perfectly, right?"

She did not give me a conventional reaction.

"Frederica, please tell me one thing. What should I do to become stronger?"

That remark seemed simple, and yet it could be interpreted in various ways. I tilted my head and cracked my neck. Just as I'd hoped, she was an interesting girl.

"What sort of strength are you referring to? Do you mean emotional strength?"

"I mean who's stronger in battle."

"I believe that what a magical girl needs is not strength. Kindness, charm, consideration, friendship, earnestness—I would say perhaps things like that are what they need."

"They're not what I need right now."

A rather argumentative exchange followed, and then Snow White excused herself before hanging up the phone.

I'd made her angry.

Indeed, perhaps there had been none of that among those who came out of Cranberry's exams. And argue idealistically as you might in attempt make yourself look good—it wouldn't turn the hell she'd lived into a utopia.

So instead of criticizing her rudeness, I sent her a message, thinking to inch just a little closer:

Why is it that you need strength?

Her reply: I need it for what I'm trying to do.

Then I asked: What are you trying to do?

The answers stopped there.

It had to be something that she couldn't say to her mentor. I decided to inch a little closer.

You were in Cranberry's exam. There are eyes on you. It goes without saying that engaging in anything illegal is a bad idea at the moment, or anything semi-illegal, for that matter. If you get involved in a violent incident, even if you are in the right, everyone will say you are just like Cranberry—

I ended up deleting most of that and rewriting my response.

You were in Cranberry's exam. Other matters aside, I doubt any magical girls will want to train you in combat. And those who do are Cranberry sympathizers who love battle and combatants, and those magical girls are currently being dealt with by the Magical Kingdom.

With that, I sent the message.

Why was I so tired when all I'd done was send one text? I picked up the binder at my side. I sat down on a kitchen chair and slowly turned a page. In this file, I'd saved photos of the magical girls I'd seen earlier. Their hairstyles had angelic luster and a supple sense of energy, done up so properly to the point of perversion. Simply gazing at magical-girl hair eased my stress. After resting my mind for a while, before long, my magical phone pinged, and I tossed the binder on top of the table.

By "dealt with," do you mean they were all apprehended?

I read and reread the message on my screen, then replied: Some deftly slipped through the authorities' fingers.

Halfway through typing, I made revisions.

There are rumors that some deftly slipped through the authorities' fingers. However, I believe those are nothing more than rumors.

That should suffice.

As expected, Snow White leaped on this subject: Is there any truth to those rumors?

I basically had an idea of what she wanted. Magical girls who had gone through Cranberry's exams—commonly called "Cranberry's children"—were, for better or for worse, often rather guileless.

My interest in Snow White was right on the mark.

I sent an insincere message: There isn't, but I want to believe my friends, then turned off my phone and picked up my binder once more.

They said the Musician of the Forest, Cranberry, had always remained in her magical girl form, but I could never do the same. I paid my rent, paid my taxes, and even if I had no occupation, I maintained my life as a human. Things were more enjoyable when experienced through a human's senses, compared to those of a magical girl—at the very least, when it came to pastimes. I really couldn't help but feel that way.

I had no basis for it. What's important was that I felt that was so.

As Snow White's mentor, I was able to look into some very detailed documents about her. Her real name was Koyuki Himekawa. Her magic was to "hear the thoughts of those in need."

Those documents also detailed the exam in N City that she beat her way through.

The mobile game *Magical Girl Raising Project*, which had sold itself as being free of charge, had been bait to search the player base for those with magical potential and make them magical girls. This selection method had been made possible through Cranberry's work with the digital fairy mascot Fav, who had a mastery of nonmagical technology and lived in a master phone that was connected to the worldwide web—something traditional small animal–type mascots couldn't manage, given how clumsy it was to work a magical phone with paws.

That reminded me—since the exposure of the Cranberry incident, there'd been a revival of opinions that the small animal types were better than the digital fairy–type mascots. A balance of the two types was much better, although the Magical Kingdom wasn't unique in how it tended to jump from one extreme to the other. But getting back to the topic at hand.

Fifteen magical girls with potential had been discovered through *Magical Girl Raising Project*. Joined by their examiner, the Musician of the Forest, Cranberry, the sixteen participants had begun the exam.

Things turned lethal when the examinees began stealing magical candy, the in-game currency, from each other; the amount of candy decided who dropped out of the game. There were betrayals and traps as participants killed one another. As the conflict ramped up, a sudden accident led to, of all things, the killing of the examiner, the Musician of the Forest.

With Cranberry's death, the exam was suspended. Fav had announced that the game was over. But after the murder of her friend, Top Speed, Ripple's rage was not satisfied, and she challenged Swim Swim to a fight—and killed her. Ripple herself was gravely wounded.

It was all quite the bloody affair, but the girl in question—Snow White—only ever came up as a victim. She was attacked by Ruler's gang, then she was attacked by Magicaloid 44, and she was just about attacked by Tama before she was saved. It was all things like that. That really didn't seem like the same magical girl who I'd spoken with on the phone and through messages.

Was it precisely because she was powerless that she'd come to seek strength? Whether she'd grown sick of her powerlessness, felt a serious sense of crisis, or a yearning for power, I couldn't say without trying to talk to the girl herself. And talking was not enough—thorough observation was needed.

I looked up the current address of Snow White—Koyuki Himekawa in the human world—and chose a moment when she was at school to intrude on the Koyuki household. I was used to missions of this nature. This was the most orthodox way to acquire some hair, after all.

With the sounds of the vacuum cleaner her mother was using in the first-floor living room as BGM, in Koyuki's room, I picked up a hair that had fallen on the carpet.

Hair cuticle. It smelled nice, too. I could just about put it in my mouth like this.

I quietly tucked the hair into a piece of tissue paper.

When I turned into a magical girl, aside from the standard extraordinary outfit, I carried a large crystal ball the size of a child's head. Tying my target's hair to my finger revealed their current location in my crystal ball. I could tie a hair to each one of my fingers, and though I could not do simultaneous broadcast, it was possible for me to change channels.

There were some drawbacks: I couldn't use my magic on those with no hair, or those with hair so short that I couldn't wrap it around a finger. But that was fine. That slight inconvenience added to the charm.

When I activated my magic, the girl was reflected there, just within reach. And if I reached out my hand, I could actually touch her. The primary use of my magic was to insert my hand into the crystal ball and pull someone to my end, which I didn't do, as that would ruin everything. Restraining my urge to reach out to the strawberry-blond hair ruffled by the wind, I simply observed, and nothing else.

Magic was a fuzzy sort of system—so with Koyuki Himekawa's hair, I could observe her completely, even when she was transformed into Snow White. So from that day forth, I became able to observe Koyuki Himekawa, a.k.a. Snow White, so long as I had the time.

Aside from that she often had her head in the clouds, she was the sort of middle schooler you'd find anywhere. She was fairly diligent about her classes. She had friends. She wasn't that incredibly charming. She was in her second year in middle school, when studying was her job. Every little thing about her, from her school-bag, socks, and scarf, to her pleated skirt, made me feel nostalgic—I supposed that was my age showing.

Even as a magical girl, she wore a costume that had the motif of a student uniform. The large white flower decoration hanging from her waist had a charm quite a bit different from Cranberry's, even if they'd both sported blossoms.

Her activities were basically the sort that were endorsed by the Magical Kingdom. She rushed this way and that, searching with precision for people in trouble. Sometimes she watched over students who anxiously walked down the street at night, and other times she carried a drunk on her back to take them home.

She was probably doing this with her magic to "hear the voices of the heart of people in trouble." I had assumed her magic was used on people right in front of her, but the range of inner voices she could pick up was far greater than I had imagined. I would hazard that there was no other telepathy-type magic that could cover such a broad range.

She would pick up a specific voice of the heart with precision, and then make sure to deal with their issue. There weren't many freshly debuted magical girls who could do this well. Perhaps she could handle using it over such a broad range because there was a limit to the content she could read.

I knew of one magical girl who had complete telepathy with no limits at all, and when a magical girl who was skilled at rapid thinking sent her information all at once, she was unable to withstand the burden, and her mind had been destroyed. That would probably never happen to Snow White.

After doing her job, Snow White would go to meet up with another magical girl who also worked in N City. The place was a little children's park, and the time was close to dawn.

She wore a black costume based on a ninja. Her long black hair was styled to the side. The most distinctive things about her were her left eye and left arm. A deep and large wound ran through the left side of her face, as if it had been carved out by a dull and heavy knife, destroying her left eye. Her left arm cover fluttered in the wind from the elbow, indicating that there was nothing inside.

Her name came up in the documentation, too. It was Ripple.

In addition to her history of having gone beyond the scope of the exam and killed a magical girl out of personal enmity, being a magical girl with one eye and one arm made her look incredibly intimidating. Based on this prior information, I'd imagined her being like an Asura or rakshasa, but the black-clad magical girl in the crystal ball was smiling kindly.

Ah, I thought. She smiled like one who had retired from the sphere.

I didn't think it was because she couldn't move like she had before, as a warrior. I'd heard that Ripple requested herself that she didn't want her wounds from the exam to be healed.

Had that been in order to punish herself for having killed someone needlessly, even if it had been getting revenge for a friend?

Or was it a lesson to herself, so that she absolutely would not forget Cranberry's exam, and so that if the other magical girls saw Ripple, they would also be forced to remember?

Or was there some other reason?

I wouldn't know unless I asked Ripple herself. And even if I did ask, I didn't know if she would tell me.

The black-and-white magical girl pair sat down side by side on the park steps, exchanging a few words here and there. Ripple looked at Snow White the way a senior student looked at a junior, or a parent looked at a child, or a teacher looked at their student, convincing me that Ripple's stance really was like that of a retiree. She had come to a sort of conclusion, within herself. I didn't know what sort of conclusion, or about what, though.

Snow White was different. She seemed like she was trying to say something to Ripple but couldn't bring herself to. Her attitude was indecisive and mumbling. It was like watching a teenage boy and girl together, and it calmed my heart. It was cute. But Snow

White's business was nothing so adorable as that.

She was trying to get stronger. She wanted a teacher who would guide her to the top. Being one of Cranberry's children, she had no one in the Magical Kingdom who would teach her how to fight. If she did, it would be someone in similar circumstances—yes, like Ripple.

It had to be difficult to ask. I could tell, just from seeing how Ripple was. I would assume that she meant to have already stepped down from the stage. She had fulfilled what she wanted to fulfill and completed what she wanted to complete. Snow White would feel bad dragging Ripple into what she wanted to do. That had to be what it was.

Snow White lacked arrogance. She lacked the shamelessness to ignore another's wants, whether it be her parent or her friend, and to show no diffidence for what she wanted to do. Cranberry had been the best at that—ignoring everything for the sake of what she wanted. While Snow White would surely not want that, that was what she should be aiming for right now.

Ripple and Snow White parted ways, and Snow White gave a little wave. Once Ripple was out of sight, she breathed a sigh.

I turned off the image in my crystal ball, undid my transformation, and pulled out my coffee grinder. I took my time grinding some beans, and while listening to the sound of the kettle whistling, I thought about Snow White.

I came to a conclusion. If I pushed her a little, then she might become just the magical girl I sought.

◇◇◇

Many before me had considered what a magical girl should do to become strong. I read over the documents such people had left behind—Cranberry's exam records included—and added in my own experiences.

There were the magical girls' individual magic powers, their physical capabilities, and finally, their combat techniques.

Magical girls varied wildly in all these domains, from the time they were born as magical girls. Some magical girls would describe this as "having a different kind of world." Some magical girls would fight with a universe-scale evil god, but other magical girls resolved neighborhood troubles while making clumsy mistakes along the way.

I didn't believe the difference there was so hopelessly great. The problem was when you *believed* there was a hopeless difference.

For a human to become stronger, they needed to be thoroughly realistic—in terms of the time they committed, or how they did it. But we were magical girls. We didn't need scientific training through perfect schedule management. We didn't outfit ourselves in rough weapons and armor, but decorated ourselves in frills and ribbons to become stronger. We existed beyond logic.

It was about the height of our ambitions, the awareness of our goals, our love for magical girls, and not having doubts about any foolish behavior, while maintaining the strength of will to carry through to the end. Rather than using a training facility and avoiding harming your health as you practiced under the guidance of an excellent coach, it was much more effective to be reckless, to use the homemade training brace your father made and train as a part of your normal life.

It was meaningful to be stubbornly naive. Let me repeat—we were magical girls. Each and every one of us was a protagonist. A protagonist cannot forget that they are a protagonist, and spending tears and sweat on behaviors that seemed like clear foolishness to others could open new horizons, if they kept aiming for the goal that lay beyond strength.

Of course, I didn't do such things. It was too much trouble, and I didn't have the energy. But it wouldn't tire or burden me if others did it. If Snow White wished to become strong, I wouldn't be unhappy about it.

I tapped the number into my magical phone.

"Hello, is this Snow White? This is Frederica."

"…Hello."

"How have you been?"

"The same as usual."

I could tell she was wondering when she'd be able to hang up.

"You mentioned before that you want to become stronger—has that changed at all?"

"No."

"You haven't given any thought to what I said, that a magical girl does not need strength?"

"No."

“You want to become strong, even if it comes at your own expense?”

“I do.”

“What if it comes at someone else’s expense?”

“…What do you mean by that?”

“Your friends and family. Do you want to become strong, even if it’s at the expense of those close to you?”

The conversation faltered. Snow White didn’t speak, but neither did she hang up.

Without waiting for a reply, I said simply, “Please think about it,” and then ended the call.

It was fair to assume that Cranberry’s exam was Snow White’s impetus in seeking strength now. Magical girls had died in that incident, and Snow White’s friends and allies must have been among them. One magical girl called La Pucelle, and another called Hardgore Alice, had died protecting Snow White.

Snow White must have reflected on her own powerlessness. Rather than being filled with a sense of omnipotence and being drunk on magical girl power, it was better to know that you were helpless. In order to aim for the top, first, you should be aware of how low it was where you stood.

Aside from ordinary activities as a magical girl, I also had experience working as a scout-slash-examiner. I’d found what I considered to be “good material” rarely enough that I could count these occasions on one hand, but even so I was one of the select career magical girls, those who made their daily bread receiving payment from the Magical Kingdom. I had pride in it. I’d grasped the trick of finding personnel. I didn’t use the template method the Magical Kingdom recommended, but rather had my own conditions.

My first condition was that they be looking up from a low position. I acquired the hair of teachers at preschools, day cares, and schools, and searched for children who seemed like they had the makings. Or I made use of the hair of the children themselves.

I searched for those who stuck out from the group. Those who were clearly excluded. Those who smiled sheepishly, even when stones were thrown at them. Those who had rumors whispered about them and pretended not to hear as they passed by, despite being bothered. Those who found their desks decorated with a vase containing a single chrysanthemum when they arrived at school in the morning.

It wasn't just about what happened at school. There were those who had a cheery and fun life at school, while hiding the bruises and cigarette burn scars on their stomachs. Those who feared the footsteps of their stepfathers visiting late at night. Those who just couldn't stand going home, and who sat hugging their knees in the forest with piles of illegally dumped household appliances.

They were depressed and repressed, the energy pent up within them with no place to go. Even knowing how bad things were, they couldn't break out of it or run away. They wanted there to be some way out of this. They wouldn't mind suffering for it, and they could put up with pain. They hoped, prayed, and wished for an escape.

Such a single-minded will shone brightly and guided them to the top as a magical girl. Even if it was twisted and faltering, that just made it that much stronger. Perhaps insane asylums would have contained the greatest material.

It wasn't as if this was without problems. It all depended on the nature and character of the individual, but most were satisfied somewhat by turning into magical girls and resolving their problems. They didn't try to aim further than that, to go beyond—it was just "Oh, what a relief," and it was over. Their imagination didn't try to go forward from that.

I'd tried before to broaden my targets to include adults. I'd thought that with the depth of their desires, surely they would be stronger than children. I couldn't deny that was a careless stereotype.

The former elite businessman who got kicked to a downsized position under the pretense of technical training, the former factory manager who continuously fled from loan sharks and was living in a home made of tarps and cardboard boxes, and the former playgirl who despaired of ever being loved again because of her age and being drowned in alcohol were all pretty close, but lacking in a final clincher. All of them wound up feeling strange about being magical girls.

In that respect, the highest rate of compatibility really was with children, or women into their twenties, at most. Even if the rare talent who could become a magical girl as an adult would often have exceptional aptitude, it was difficult to find them because they were so few overall—so then gathering child candidates and screening those could enable you to gather talent more efficiently.

But then children would be satisfied once their desires were somewhat fulfilled.

And so, Snow White.

She had participated in Cranberry's exam, been greatly affected by it, and wanted power. She sought the combat ability to stop magical girls who would do something similar to what Cranberry had done. There was no end to that desire. It was like a *shounen* manga where no matter how strong you were, a stronger enemy would appear—she would have to strengthen herself until she became an invincible magical girl who would never lose, no matter who she was up against.

And she would carry that out, with a strong will. This was not some vague longing for strength. She was one who had made the choice. This just meant that there was no limit to the power necessary for the methods she had chosen. She would continue to seek it forever. Just as Cranberry had, most likely, until her death.

I thought it truly was fitting to call them Cranberry's children. The way the Musician of the Forest lived continued to attract both those who envied her and those who hated her, in equal measure.

Well then, what about the one who had "stepped down"?

One hour before Snow White would finish her daily helping activities, I went to visit Ripple. In order to make contact with her, I had to gain the permission of the magical girl who was her mentor. It seemed that she had not taken an interest in the mentoring role, but rather had had the role basically forced on her. So while she was exasperated with my enthusiasm, she easily gave permission, saying "do as you please."

Ripple also spent time helping people, but it wasn't as if she was running around restlessly to busy herself everywhere and not settle in one place. She had an orthodox style: She patrolled along a fixed route, would pause briefly atop a tall building, then patrol again, resolving problems as they occurred. Not being able to hear the inner voices of those in need like Snow White, that had to be the easiest way for her to do things.

Making use of hair that I'd acquired by sneaking into Kano Sazanami's apartment beforehand, I checked in on her, and then when she stopped briefly on the roof of a department store, I called out to her.

She noticed me by sound or by my presence before I even said a word, reaching for the hilt of her sword and turning around to face me. She really did move like Cranberry's youngest. Her movements were efficient, and her eyes were sharp. Most of all, she was fast. In half a blink, she was fully ready to fight, readying in a low stance, nearly on all fours on the stone paving.

It seemed her ninja-style costume was not just for show, and her speed was top class, even compared with magical girls overall. And with her magic shuriken that always hit their targets, she was pretty strong. It made sense that she'd made it through that exam.

And as she moved, her long black hair fluttered like a living thing. It was very rare for black hair to shine in the darkness. It was fine hair. It made me want to comb it with my fingers. Just imagining the smooth texture flowing between my fingers was irresistible, but I would hold back for now.

I held my palm out at her and smiled, showing that I had no hostility or ill will. Ripple moved her hand away from her sword, and she straightened up. Her expression was still hard.

I bowed and gave her my business card. Having even one business card on your person made a slight difference when you were a magical girl in a position of power.

"I'm also Snow White's mentor, as I'm sure you're aware," I said.

"Snow White's?"

I thought I saw her expression soften a little. Even with the marks of a ghastly battle remaining on her face, she still looked somewhat cute—well, she was a magical girl, after all. The scar on her face had thinner skin of a different color, and when she expressed hostility, it was brimming with impact and intimidation. But right now, I felt as if it had the air of a wounded soldier's sorrow, left all alone after her comrades-in-arms died without her.

I didn't let my feelings show on my face, however.

"She asked me for some advice," I said.

"Advice."

"About what she should do in order to become stronger."

Ripple's expression visibly darkened. A wrinkle gathered in her brow, and her scar seemed to grow tight.

"Are you aware of the reason why Snow White is trying to become stronger?"

Ripple didn't answer and simply hung her head. Her eyes were on her own toes, on the feet that wore single-toothed geta. Even with such unsteady footwear, so long as it was her original costume, a magical girl would always be able to move around without issue.

I focused on the present and continued. “Snow White was a participant in Cranberry’s final exam, as you yourself were. Others will be watching you closely. If you’re just trying to get stronger, that’s one thing, but if you have some kind of goal…I can’t imagine that will go well.”

Ripple didn’t open her mouth and didn’t make to meet my eyes.

“I have no intention of reporting you to the Magical Kingdom,” I told her.

Ripple seemed mildly shocked, lifting her chin.

I nodded at her. “If I meant to report you, then I wouldn’t have come to talk to you.”

I gave her a casual smile in an attempt to ease her wariness as much as I could. Its efficacy aside, it’s practically become a habit of mine.

“However, if the Magical Kingdom learns that she’s seeking strength and I’m unable to explain that sufficiently, then I’ll be relieved of my post. And if that happens, who knows what sort of magical girl will be assigned to her next? If someone intensely hostile toward Cranberry were to become Snow White’s mentor, I strongly believe that would be bad for her.”

Ripple gave me a penetrating look with her remaining eye. It was a serious expression indeed.

Somewhat satisfied, I let out a breath and surveyed the area.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve been on the roof of a department store,” I said. “Oh, this takes me back.”

The department store roof that I went to once a week when I was a child seemed bigger, had a higher fence around the edge, and the retail stands and play equipment were fancier. Perhaps that was because I had been looking with a child’s eyes, or perhaps it was a change of the times and the coming of the recession. The popcorn stand, the stone paving, and part of the iron railing were new, so it seemed it wasn’t entirely abandoned.

I turned back to Ripple once more. She seemed a little bit bewildered. Toying with her a little bit like this made negotiations easier.

“Could you question Snow White about her motives for me? I tried asking, but she was evasive and wouldn’t answer. If you were to ask, then she just might tell you.” I gave her a firm look. “If it’s the right thing to do, then I shall help, too. Snow White is in need of aid, isn't she?"

Ripple gazed at me with unwavering eyes. She was evaluating me. Having lived a life of battle, it didn't seem like she would be experienced at all in negotiation—from what I'd seen of her background, she had more than the look—but Ripple was tough in that area, too. That was what it meant to be one of Cranberry's children.

I exchanged e-mail addresses and phone numbers with Ripple. Now I could contact her at any time. After that, I took her hand for a light shake, released it, then waved my hand with a smile and leaped down from the department store roof. When I turned away from her, I sensed her tense up at my having so casually given her an opening. It was a very mild murderous aura. *She* would never turn her back on someone so casually. Even if she seemed as if she'd left the battlefield, she was still a fighter. That was rather nice, I felt.

The next day, I contacted Snow White.

"Did you say something to Ripple?" was the first thing she said to me. That was also very nice.

"As your mentor, I wanted to know about your friends," I replied. "I was relieved to see she is such a good one to you."

"That was unnecessary."

Her tone of voice grew higher and louder. I made sure not to let it pull my own voice higher.

"It was not. You're in enough danger right now that from where I stand, it seems to me you have to be just that careful. Besides…" I paused. "You never did tell me, in the end, why you wish to become stronger."

"I don't need to tell you that."

The tone of her voice dropped slightly. Snow White had flinched—just a bit.

This was my chance. I pressed further. "If you tell me, then I can help you. If you don't tell me, then I won't be able to help out. Whether what you want to do is criminal in nature or against the will of the Magical Kingdom, I will not let it slip to anyone else. I shall swear that on myself as a magical girl."

I doubted that I was worth enough as a magical girl to be able to swear on myself, but I wouldn't know how Snow White felt about it.

"Do you remember what I said before?" I continued. "About what you would be willing to sacrifice to get stronger. If the word *sacrifice* is too strong, then let me put it another way. What would you be willing to use? Yes, it's all right. You may use me. It's because you're trying to do absolutely everything on your own that you're so helpless right now."

She fell silent. But she was listening. I could sense her on the other end of the magical phone.

"If you have no one to practice with, then you should ask Ripple. If a mentor is the type who likes to meddle, then just flatter her so she'll do as you please—make her a tool for training yourself. You know—compared to the likes of Cranberry, it's difficult to call me good at fighting. But I have raised a number of magical girls. I'm confident that when it comes to raising magical girls, I am just as good as Cranberry. I am truly the perfect person for you to use to get stronger."

I paused for a breath there.

"Use me, Snow White. And to that end, please be open with me. What do you want to do? Why do you want to get stronger? If I know the reason, then I will be able to offer appropriate advice."

"…You…"

It was less that the tone of her voice was calm and more that it had weakened. Having someone who might understand there was bringing out her weakness. That was a good trend.

"What is it worth to you to be used by me?" she asked.

"That's just what it is to be a mentor. Schools in the human world are just the same. The students use the teacher and go out into society. If you can become more like the magical girl of your dreams by using me, then nothing could make me gladder. I'm doing this job prepared to be used."

Silence came once more. Without waiting for her answer, I said, "I'm waiting to hear a favorable response," then hung up.

On that day, unusually, Snow White had had a fight with Ripple.

My magic can't pick up sound. So I wasn't able to tell what they were talking about, but I could tell from looking, at least, that they were having a heated exchange. And having gone to both of them to shake them up, I could easily imagine what it was about, too.

Snow White was trying to get stronger. She was trying to put herself into places where she would fight.

Ripple couldn't accept that. In her mind, the fighting was over.

Ripple was only ever thinking about Snow White. If Snow White had also been thinking of Ripple, then the two of them wouldn't be clashing. But Snow White was wavering. I had made her waver. She was different from how she had been one week ago. If Ripple was the only one she had to rely on, then she would rely on Ripple.

With occasional tears welling in their eyes, the two of them continued their dispute before parting without ever reaching a conclusion. Snow White turned her back to Ripple as Ripple left and didn't wave like she always did.

I immediately turned on my magical phone and called Ripple. "Hello. This is Frederica."

"Yeah… Hi."

"How did things go with Snow White? Did she tell you about her goal?"

Ripple didn't answer. She would be thinking that me calling her like this right after they had parted ways meant, in other words, that I must have been watching her. It was a fact that I'd been watching her. I knew Ripple would find it suspicious. It was fine for Ripple to see me that way. It would actually be a problem if she felt I was someone she could rely on.

Certain that Snow White had told Ripple about her goal, I pressed further. "I'm concerned."

"Concerned?"

"Yes, I am. That at this rate, Snow White might well do something reckless. That her desire to become stronger might grow so much, she might throw herself someplace dangerous without having a grasp on her own abilities."

I had my magical phone in my right hand while I manipulated my crystal ball with my left. I could see Ripple, holding her magical phone. She looked like she'd just swallowed a bitter pill. It was rather nice when someone wore their heart on their sleeve.

"Even if I were to try to stop her, I doubt she would listen," I continued. "But what about you, Ripple? Can you stop Snow White from being reckless?"

I knew the answer. There were no words that would stop Snow White.

"I'd like to do something before things go badly." Emphasizing my concern for Snow White, I hung up the phone.

Ripple remained frozen in my crystal ball, still holding her magical phone. Satisfied with the results of what I'd said to her, I erased the image in my crystal ball.

If Snow White was left to her own devices, she would act on her own. She would head off someplace dangerous unprepared and get hurt. At *best*, she would get hurt—she would most likely die.

Rather than let that happen, it would be better to ensure she was prepared. Ripple should teach Snow White how to fight, and in doing so, heighten Snow White's survivability.

I had implicitly said as much, and I figured Ripple had understood me correctly.

Next, I contacted Snow White. "Hello? This is Frederica."

"…Hello."

Her voice was trembling. *Ah, she must have been crying.* I didn't have to use the crystal ball to know that.

I deliberately stuck to casual chitchat. I asked her about unimportant things, like how was school, what about exams, giving her advice that seemed very significant but was in fact the sort anyone could give. Then when I tried to hang up the phone and say good-bye, Snow White opened her mouth.

"Um."

It sounded like she'd blurted that out and startled even herself.

"What's the matter?" I prompted her, as gently as possible. There was a child inside the door who wanted it opened. There was no need for me to force it open from my end. I had set up enough that she should open it from that side. I should just wait patiently until the effects were shown. It would surely be that day, or the next…no, it was now.

After just over two minutes of silence, Snow White began to speak, with occasional pauses.

Everything she said, I'd anticipated, so I was not shocked at all. But nevertheless, I did more or less make it seem that I was surprised as I made interjections to have her continue, drawing it all out of her.

If there were any magical girls like Cranberry, she was going to stop them. She wanted to keep that from ever happening again. She also wanted to proactively interfere in major conflicts of the human world. To that end, she had to get stronger, no matter what.

The idealism was very like Snow White. As for if she could do it or not—I believed she could.

The Magical Kingdom's monitoring system was slack, even with a problem child of note requiring special attention like Snow White. To put it unkindly, it was a careless principle of laissez-faire. That sort of thing never changed, not in a hundred years, and not in a thousand. If "Cranberry's children" were to take the public stage, I was sure people would view them with bias, but if I were to help her out, attending her on the pretext of mentor-slash-monitor, then we could smother that as we pleased.

Snow White loathed certain kinds of behavior. Types like that lasted for a long time.

Ripple hated individuals. Those would burn out quickly.

But from what I could see, she hadn't completely burned herself out. At the depths of her heart, she was smoldering. If I did my best to blow on those coals and nurture them into a fire, then she would come to help Snow White, at least.

I made it seem as if I was shocked by what she said, telling her to let me consider it a bit before I hung up the phone. I had to react to it at least this seriously, or she would either think of me as just a thoughtless magical girl or be suspicious.

Of course, I'd already come to my conclusion. I would make Snow White into a strong magical girl. With her personality, with her mentality, I might be able to get close to the ideal magical girl I had in mind. I might be able to update the old ways and change the moldy old Magical Kingdom. I sensed a talent I hadn't seen in a long time. I was itching to put my skills to use as a mentor.

It would be best for her to become so great that even if the officials knew of her behavior, they wouldn't be able to interfere so easily. She should expose a couple of magical girls who were doing bad things—that would be a wordless attack on the Magical Kingdom's laissez-faire policy, earn her a nickname, and make villains fear her. Conversely, the Magical Kingdom would use her as a symbol for eliminating villains.

I would have to think up something frightening for the nickname. White Devil. White God of Death. No. Something more like…not about her appearance, but expressing her actions… I would leave that for homework.

I powered off my magical phone and placed it on the table, then left the kitchen and put my hand on the sliding door of the tatami room. A whirring sound could be heard continuously from within. The fan for air circulation was spinning on and on.

I slid open the door. When I stepped inside, my foot sank in slightly. I felt with the sole of my foot the tatami, a different sensation from flooring. Until a year ago, the tatami had still smelled refreshing and fresh, but the scent had quickly dissipated—perhaps due to the endless spinning of the fan.

When I entered this room, happiness suffused my whole body.

Instead of walls, both sides were filled with rough steel bookshelves, and the opposite side was also filled by a similar bookshelf. Just in case, I had used supports bought at the hardware store to make it earthquake resistant, but I had no idea how useful it would be if a major earthquake were to happen.

The shelves were lined with file folders. Following the English letters displayed on them, I picked up the file I was after and opened it. There was a single piece of hair, stuck in a piece of tissue paper. It was dark blond and slightly wavy.

This was an item in my collection that I was particularly attached to. Just looking at this strand of hair, so many memories rose vividly in my mind. But I also felt this had caused me to cling to it on and on, unwilling to let go and unable to move forward. But since now, I had a subject for my interest, Snow White—

Taking out the hair, I slid the file back in the shelf and returned to the tatami room. I placed my foot on the pedal and opened the kitchen garbage, letting the hair I'd pinched in my fingers flutter down. The hair, dropped on top of an avocado peel, looked a little sad… Oh, such sentimentality. I was embarrassed for myself.

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I wound up carelessly missing just what sort of exchange the two of them had, but that wasn't what I was curious about, anyhow. So long as Ripple kept supervising Snow White's combat training, then I was fine.

Even calling it combat training, they weren't doing things like running and jumping. They mainly sparred—Ripple guided her in the correct way of kicking and punching. If possible, I would have liked to see her do throws and joint locks against magical girls, but perhaps Ripple didn't have such a technique; she mainly relied on projectiles.

Ripple seemed to be relieved.

Snow White was weaker, slower, and clumsier in technique than Ripple—in other words, she was inferior in every aspect.

She would never be able to go out into a real fight like this. In fact, maybe she would quit right now. I could imagine that was what Ripple was relieved about.

I was relieved, too. Even having the difference in their abilities and practical combat experience thrust in her face, even if she wasn't taken seriously and occasionally was knocked to the ground in the park with her white costume covered in dirt, Snow White never lost her determination to fight. That really was nice. And cute.

It was fine that Ripple was stronger than she was. Ripple had fought her way through the violent battle where even Cranberry had lost her life, and survived. The wounds she had gotten were proof of her battle experience. Of course she would be stronger than Snow White, who most likely had never even thought about fighting. So then it was best for Snow White to not despair in their difference in abilities and not lose heart, maintaining her will to fight.

I observed Snow White's and Ripple's training for three days after that. Though the way she moved was starting to look good, there truly was nothing to be done about the starkly soaring difference in their abilities, and Snow White never got past being pushed around by Ripple.

I paid particular attention to Snow White's expressions. Even failing to match her friend, day after day, she still was not giving up. But I could see her impatience. She was restless, wondering how much stronger she would get from continuing this training. And she was right to be impatient. Though Ripple was technically training with her, she didn't want Snow White to get stronger.

After Snow White's training that day was over, I contacted her. "I've made up my mind. I will help you out."

I heard her draw in a breath from the other end of the phone. She paused for a good moment before replying, *"Thank you."*

"Oh, no, please don't worry about it. I told you before, didn't I? You should use me. I want nothing more, as your mentor."

I checked Snow White through my crystal ball. Beyond her apologetic face, I could see the ocean. The lights of a fishing boat were sparkling on the horizon. It seemed she was making this call from atop an iron tower close to the ocean.

"I'll tell you the trick. Please remember this. The first thing is to spend as much time as a magical girl as possible. Make your time as a human the shortest possible, and generally remain a magical girl when you're alone."

Humans and magical girls had a different sense of time. When you were trying to learn something, it was more convenient to be a magical girl. So long as you had no special business, such as wanting to experience some time for a hobby, like me, then you should remain as a magical girl.

In my crystal ball, Snow White was conscientiously taking notes. It was truly charming, seeing this obedience added on top of her stoicism, in pursuing strength.

"Please believe that your life as a human is ultimately for show, and your true role is as a magical girl. It's not enough to think it. You must believe it. And moreover, while you are a magical girl and while you are human, please be constantly simulating battles in your head. Do not simply think of it. Envision yourself in a whirlpool of killing and being killed. Do not wish it—*believe* in it."

This may have been impossible for someone with absolutely no combat experience, but having had her mock battles with Ripple, then it should not be out of the question. It would still be difficult, but not impossible.

I believed that the greatest source of support for a magical girl's strength was her imagination. It was written in Snow White's profile from Cranberry's final exam that she had a habit of daydreaming. Cranberry was a sinister but charming battle-mad woman who was happy so long as she was fighting, and Fav was a natural straight bastard and terrible person, but they were never wrong when it came to character evaluation of the examinees. Daydreaming and imagination are the same thing. Feelings, thoughts, prayers, and beliefs made up the unbreakable, thick, and supple backbone of a magical girl.

It was primitive, but that was fine. My personal method of raising a magical girl would be perfect for Snow White.

"Do not give up. Do not doubt. And remain serious. These three things are it. We are magical girls. In terms of general societal standards, our existence itself is absurd. That is precisely why you must be serious about this."

It was by doing something foolish seriously that a magical girl became stronger. Adorable Cranberry was a good example.

"Our lives in human society are supplementary. You may be a student studying for entrance exams, but you will not study properly for your exams. Either cheat outright to pass, or choose a high school where you can pass without studying, or quit after middle school—choose one."

If you tried a reckless move, you'd succeed more often than you thought.

I talked to Snow White about how to become stronger, and she noted every single thing I said down until the end, without voicing any doubts about what I was saying. When I apologized that I couldn't watch her combat training myself, she told me that Ripple was training with her. *Yes*, I thought, *I know*.

"Thank you very much," she said.

"It's all right. Don't worry about it. I'm doing this because I like it."

"Oh, no, but please let me say my thanks. You've helped me a lot," she said with a serious expression, clasping her hand in front of her chest.

Seeing her made my heart clench. Why was everything about this girl so cute? Cranberry's exam records had noted that others protected her many times, too—was this sort of thing the reason?

What an un-magical girl-like devilish charm.

It took time, but Snow White managed to keep up with Ripple. It was more or less turning into a teacher-and-student situation, rather than her just being toyed with. Even if Ripple's skills still towered over hers, Snow White had basically gotten started. She was aware of her goal and clearly pointed in one direction.

Snow White was sticking to my instructions with simple honesty. She imagined, thought, and believed. It wasn't just two or three hours in a day. She used the hours when she normally would have been sleeping, whittling down on her time in human form to *fight* as a magical girl. She would go home and meditate. She'd finish her magical girl activities, then meditate. Right after eating breakfast, meditation. She was always battling in her heart.

The real sense of getting stronger was most fun when you were on the way. I'd experienced it myself, so I understood. Snow White seemed like she was truly having fun.

Ripple seemed like she was confused. She saw Snow White as someone to protect and not as a comrade-in-arms to fight shoulder-to-shoulder with. This was arrogant, but not wrong. If Snow White hadn't gotten motivated, then most likely, their relationship would have continued like that.

While Ripple was still confused, the way she taught Snow White began to change. She became more like a teacher guiding a student, rather than dodging a playing child. But Snow White still wasn't even at elementary school level—this was day care or preschool. All Ripple taught was the basics, and that alone was enough for Snow White.

That was fine for now. Magical girls were different from humans. It took quite a bit of training for a human to even become able to master a "correct low kick." But a magical girl just needed a trigger, and emotion.

I had been thinking that Ripple didn't want Snow White to get stronger, but it looked as if she was not entirely dissatisfied. Or rather, perhaps it was correct to say that she was glad to see Snow White enjoying herself.

I opened my file, adding in notes such as "it might be nice for this girl to have a little more moisture in her hair" on the photos that I'd newly added to my collection as I imagined my perfect version of Snow White. If there was anything lacking, then what was it? The complexly braided long, soft, and vividly golden shining hair gave a sharp kick to my inspiration. I had a flash of insight.

Range and attack power—areas she would continue to lack in even if she kept on training. Snow White hadn't pictured herself with those skills. That said, forcing her in that direction and distorting her growth would ruin everything.

I placed the file folder on the table and pulled up the documents on my magical phone. There was something that had appeared in Cranberry's exams, and its whereabouts were not in the records.

After making sure that their training was over and the two of them had parted ways, I contacted Ripple.

"Hello, Ripple? This is Frederica. I'm calling because there's something I wanted to chat with you about. Do you mind?"

"…Sure."

"During Cranberry's exams, there should have been a number of Magical Kingdom items…such as a bag and a weapon. Do you know what became of those?"

“Holding on to them… Snow White and I…”

She was trailing off in places—likely because she didn’t want to say, and she was being made to talk about something she didn’t want to remember.

“So then do you two still have them?”

“Yes.”

“There should be five things—the four-dimensional bag, the invisibility cloak, energy pills, the rabbit’s foot, and a weapon.”

“Yes.”

“Could you tell me which of you carries what?”

“The bag, the weapon, and the cloak…are with me…Snow White is holding on to the rabbit’s foot. The pills…I think they were probably all used up during the exam. Since there were none left.”

I see, I see. So Ripple sees it as just holding on to them?

“It seems ownership of the items is unclear,” I said.

“Yes.”

“So you can lend and borrow the items between the two of you.”

“…Why are you asking me that?”

“If the time comes when Snow White means to fight, then it would be best for her to have more tools at her disposal.”

“Weren’t you against Snow White fighting?”

Ripple was blaming herself. It seemed that Ripple didn’t want Snow White fighting, after all. Maybe she’d been a little glad to see Snow White so happily training. It made sense to be happy when a friend was happy. But deep down, she hadn’t changed.

Right when the exam had been about to end, Ripple had fought for her friend and gotten revenge by killing her enemy. Had that been venting her anger against the one who had killed her friend? Hadn’t that partially been about lightening her own sin of letting her friend die?

Even if her sin was lightened, it would never vanish. She would carry it forever. She was still carrying it now.

Ripple couldn’t bear to see her friend in danger.

“What I was against,” I began, “was Snow White acquiring only a smattering of knowledge and, believing incorrectly that she had become strong, going out into danger. So long as what Snow White wishes for is not wrong, then I would like to grant it for her, as much as I can.”

“You can let her do that, even knowing it’s dangerous?”

"In her case, it might not be dangerous."

Ripple clicked her tongue.

"A magical girl like her shouldn't be in combat."

"That's something Snow White will decide on her own. It's not for you to decide."

She clicked her tongue even louder and hung up.

Ripple was getting emotional and not trying to hide it—perhaps out of guilt that she herself had taken Snow White's hand and guided her into battle. Ripple was weak to such pushes…weak to Snow White's pushing. When they'd fought before parting ways the last time, Ripple had begun helping Snow White with her training in the end, just like Snow White wanted. That partly had to be because Ripple had accepted my advice that the worst thing would be to let Snow White do something dangerous when she was still weak. But I believed the biggest reason she had accepted my advice might well have been Snow White's tears during their fight.

She treasured her friend, and that was what bound her, keeping her from acting—that was Ripple, right now.

I picked up the file folder and began flipping through its pages to sharpen the workings of my mind. I imagined a completed version of Snow White, making corrections to my vision as I went.

In addition to athleticism and powerful magic, Cranberry's strength had been backed by a wealth of experience, and the knowledge gained from that. Knowing the weaknesses and strength of a given magic was the key to victory in battles between magical girls.

Snow White lacked Cranberry's knowledge and experience, but her magic was to hear the thoughts of those in need. Apparently, during the exam, she had heard the mental voice of an enemy who had not wanted to be found and discovered their location. She'd also heard Fav's internal voice, thinking that he'd be in trouble if he was attacked by a Magical Kingdom weapon, and so had had Ripple attack him.

Yes, she knew what the enemy didn't want done. Even without prior knowledge of their magic, she could fight from a similar position as Cranberry in any given situation. She could make good use of her four items and make the best choices for the situation.

By the time I was done reading, inside my head, Snow White had become the strongest and most absolutely invincible magical girl in history. Satisfied, I set down the file folder and stretched my back.

Just as I’d anticipated, Ripple did not give up on Snow White’s training. She prioritized her association with Snow White over her own selfishness.

Indeed, it was arrogant selfishness to take a sword away from someone who said they would fight, telling them to stand behind you and tremble. Ripple understood that, too. It was because she understood that she was angry at me.

Snow White fired a light jab, then made it seem like she was going for a right high kick—but when Ripple swept her pivot leg out from under her, she fell, Ripple twisting her right arm around and forcing her to the ground. The two of them broke apart immediately, and this time Snow White went from a jump to bringing down her fist with full power, which Ripple lightly brushed aside.

In just a month, Snow White had absorbed and memorized how to move her body, just like a sponge sucking up water. No—she had learned even more than she had been taught.

She followed up her jab with a high kick. This technique blocked one side with a fist, creating a blind spot before making the kick. She had made use of Ripple’s handicap of one eye. It was dirty, and not simply making correct use of what she had been taught.

This was nothing but a little craftiness right now, but give it a month, and that would change. However, her wildly telegraphed jumping punch was a little unsatisfactory. It was fine to come up with her own ideas, but Ripple would correct that sort of unnecessary performance.

I turned off the image in my crystal ball. Snow White was growing quite beautifully. I couldn’t spend all my time and attention on that. There was a mountain of things I had to get done. I was lagging in my regular business, too. I had decisions to make and things to think about.

Both humans and magical girls shone brightest when they were needed. The work most needed from me, the number one business on my priority list, was the next newbie selection exam. As a scout and as a mentor, I would send my ideal, most excellent talent. I would gather candidates, have them fight and compete, and select a magical girl. For the sake of my ideals, I would make a selection—of a righteous heroine who would defeat evil and uphold justice.

To that end, I needed preparation. And the plan for the next exam was…

Upon checking my magical phone, I noticed it was coming right up. I wanted to add a little accent to that. I skimmed over the faces of the participants registered in my magical phone. There just wasn't any talent there that struck me. There were no magical girls with hair that made me want to touch it. To get out of this rut, I wanted to put in my own twist. Something small, even, would be enough.

I know.

I came up with an idea. How about making an amusement park the stage for the exam? It would be on the roof of the department store where Snow White first met Ripple. There was a certain atmosphere to the facility at night, surrounded by play equipment and vendor stalls.

I pulled out a file folder, so as to make my new idea a reality.

For the month following, it was fair to say things went generally, if not entirely, smoothly.

Ripple and Snow White's sparring became more intense, and they moved their training grounds from the park into the mountains. They were concerned that they might gouge out the ground or break playground equipment, and sadden the children. This was a very magical girl–appropriate concern, both heartwarming and sensible.

Being in the forest enabled them to move more vertically, and they clashed like they would in real combat: jumping off rock walls to leap on each other, making use of that momentum to grab an arm and throw the opponent, doing three turns in the air to land and instantly strike back again.

Snow White's powers of imagination were working brilliantly now, and she was much closer to the ideal in her mind. She was still a ways from Ripple, but she was still a good opponent. Considering how she'd been two months ago, it was astounding. Her powers of imagination were even more marvelous than I had thought.

Surprisingly, Ripple was moving better, too. She must have been set off by Snow White, as she had grown as well. Now Snow White and Ripple were helping each other grow. The two of them were so charming, sitting down side by side on some rocks and wiping off their sweat as they discussed with occasional smiles how to approach something.

I didn't even know how I should describe it—perhaps I could say I looked at them like a mother. It was so emotional to watch over the two of them, thinking about how they'd grown into such good girls and gotten so strong. Sometimes, I even felt like I could shed a tear, oh dear.

Now she just had to get Ripple to lend her those items—but even when I called Ripple, she didn't pick up. She was refusing my calls. That type can be so stubborn.

I needed to see Ripple and talk to her in person. She was vital for Snow White's growth, and my communication with Ripple was also vital.

My phone calls with Snow White continued without interruption. I committed to the act of the good senior, making reference to what I saw of their training in my crystal ball to give her advice.

"I see. So she's able to read your movements."

"Yes, and she basically catches me no matter what I do. Um… If you don't mind my asking, could we meet in person so you can see this for yourself?"

"I'm sorry—much as I would love to, my schedule is just so terribly busy."

"Oh…"

She had implied subtly many times that she wanted to meet. Today, she was the most straightforward yet. As happy as that made me, I preferred to avoid meeting her face-to-face.

"Now then… Would you say you have a few quirks of your own?"

"Quirks…?"

"Drawing back your foot a little when you're about to advance, for instance. Those small habits might clue her in to your next movements.”

Snow White actually did do that.

“You should dig through your habits and make use of them instead. Like with that example, if you come forward without drawing your foot back, you could take the enemy by surprise.”

Snow White listened to me obediently, and then deliberately exposed the habit that Ripple was already aware of to cause Ripple to make a move, then punished that initial movement and successfully smacked a kick into Ripple’s thigh. Ripple was surprised, but Snow White was surprised, too.

In the phone call after their training that day, I could easily tell how excited she was, even without using my crystal ball. I always praised her; all that joy made a magical girl even stronger. Snow White’s happiness was my happiness.

And so, things were going well in the Snow White area. As you can tell from how I explicitly added “in the Snow White area,” things were not going well at my principal occupation.

I’d held an exam on the department store roof because it had left quite a deep impression on me, but it had turned out to be a mess. The play equipment and facilities were damaged in vain, proving Snow White’s and Ripple’s wisdom in having moved from the park to the mountains, and on top of that, not a single one of the ten participants passed. Exhausted for nothing, I gazed at my file folder for comfort, flipping through the pages. The examinees had become new material to add to the folder, and in that sense it wasn’t a complete waste, but it hadn’t been enough to give my spirit any kick. Jotting in notes on the photos, adding in the used hairs at the side, I sighed, feeling like I was doing this out of obligation or inertia.

Oh well. There was Snow White. And I wasn’t just saying this to console myself in my exhaustion. Snow White was a very interesting magical girl. She was, without exaggeration, my type. Raising Snow White to adulthood would be my greatest job as a magical girl. So a minor failure over this exam was no problem.

Turning on the TV for no particular reason, I saw the news that ten girls had died in a bus accident. Looking at the mournful expression on the newscaster even made me depressed. I turned off the TV and went to making up the documents to submit to the higher-ups. Snow White was a very good magical girl with no violent tendencies at all and spent every day making use of her magic to busy herself in helping people, period dot.

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Now that I'd casually dealt with my regular duties, I could finally devote all my time to Snow White. Though my unresolved problem was not Snow White, but Ripple, however.

Currently, I had managed to build a friendly relationship with Snow White. It was fair to say I had inveigled her.

Ripple was a hassle in comparison. Her tongue clicks over the phone cut sharper than a knife. Between her history as a magical girl and what she was doing, it was unmistakably clear that she treasured her friend. I would have to be flexible in persuading her and use Snow White to my advantage.

I made sure that Snow White and Ripple had parted ways and that Snow White had come down from the mountain, then went to visit Ripple.

The emptier the mountains, the more mystical they became, and the night of a full moon further enhanced that. It made even the insects gathering on mossy rocks and tree bark summon emotions. The spring water that trickled out from the rocks and through the trees merged with the river, and I aimed upstream, following along the river at the valley bottom with rock walls on either side. Hopping off the rocks at a good tempo, I flew along. A magical girl would not slip by accident.

Even after parting ways with Snow White, Ripple hadn't left yet. She had her legs crossed atop a rock. I didn't know if she was zoning out, meditating, thinking, or listening to the babbling of the river. She had always been like this, ever since Snow White's training had moved to the mountains. If there was any moment we could talk, it was now.

Hopping up to the rocky area where she was sitting, I bowed my head. "Hello, it's been quite some time, Ripple."

As soon as I revealed myself, she gave me a completely disgusted look. *Oh, she hates me.*

"About what we spoke about before—were you able to consider it?" I asked.

She turned her head away. She clearly didn't mean to listen. In her mind, I was surely a traitor who had failed to maintain her trust.

“I’m grateful you’ve managed to train her. Snow White has grown so much stronger, too.”

Ripple glared at me. With no light but the moon, Ripple’s right eye had a piercing glow. It didn’t look like that of a human or a magical girl, but like some kind of monster or apparition. Not that I’d ever seen a monster or an apparition, but I was sure they would have such a powerful look in their eye.

“So you were monitoring us, after all.”

“Huh?”

“How do you know that Snow White’s gotten stronger?”

Oh no. I said too much.

“It’s not quite right to call it *monitoring*. I believe it’s more accurate to describe it as *watching over you*. I have an obligation to watch and see whether she is truly walking the correct path.”

A tongue click. She was angry. But if she wasn’t going straight home now, then there was still room for negotiation. I just had to draw out lots of sincerity to win her over. I shifted from trivial small talk to talk about work, nonchalantly working in that magical girls who were like my students worked in various places after leaving me, to show off that I was a capable mentor. Then I added that some students still made me worry even now, sighing with a pained look, as I lightly wiped away my tears with a fingertip.

At this point, I examined Ripple’s face. Her bottom lip was stuck right out. It was cute, but it seemed she was still angry. *Let’s continue.*

I told her how glad I was to be able to meet a girl as talented as Snow White. I praised her humanity and her ambition. I spoke of her immeasurable potential, and how she might be able to change the Magical Kingdom, which thought little of magical girls and hardly paid attention to them, and how opening up the organization like this would make Snow White happier, too. I meant to speak calmly, so that I wouldn’t sound too flippant, but I wasn’t sure how she took it.

I examined Ripple’s expression. Ripple’s eye was trained on the other side of the river, and she had a “Huh?” look on her face. Drawn to look in the same direction, I found out that everything was ruined.

Snow White was there, at the edge of the mountain stream. In her right hand, she carried a white lump of fur—that had to be the rabbit's foot. Snow White had not left. She had gone back home to come back with the rabbit's foot. Maybe they had discussed redistributing their items. If that was the case, it would mean Ripple had actually listened to my opinion.

The rabbit's foot. A magical item that brought good luck. Perhaps to Snow White, this was lucky—since she'd gotten a rare chance to meet with the mentor she adored.

To me, this was the worst sort of misfortune. Seeing Snow White's expression, colored with shock, gradually twist up, I swung my right leg up high. My skirt fluttered up. I kicked down with my shin, aiming for the back of Ripple's head as she stood beside me, and knocked her down from the rocky area.

I didn't manage a clean hit. Though Ripple wasn't able to avoid it, right before it connected, she placed her arm around the back of her head to cushion it. I was impressed that she managed to respond so well to a surprise attack from the person she had only just been speaking with—but still, I felt her arm break.

Ripple fell into the river, and beyond the spray of water that went up, I could see Snow White. She was running toward me, yelling something incomprehensible with a twisted expression.

This meant that it was definitely over.

The reason I had so stubbornly avoided meeting Snow White in person was because of her magic to hear the thoughts of those in need. If I met her and thought, *I'd be in trouble if she knew that,* she could well read my mind from just that alone. And I think that she had actually heard it. She'd reacted like she had, even before I kicked down Ripple.

Since I knew what her magic was, I had no way of stopping what I thought about it. This was an unusual case where knowing someone's magic would in fact put you at a disadvantage. Snow White really was a special magical girl.

I would have liked to make my ideal magical girl. Strong, kind, cool, putting herself on the line for justice, crying for others—that sort of magical girl. That sort of magical girl wouldn't be able to turn a blind eye to how the Magical Kingdom was. I would be her counselor in her coup d'etat. And if she allowed it, then we'd take some time alone together, I'd lay her head on my thigh, and I'd stroke her hair. Because I loved magical girls like that.

Right now, I loved Snow White. Before Snow White, I loved the Musician of the Forest, Cranberry. Loving her, I peeked in on her life, and what she was doing stimulated my curiosity. Wondering about how meaningful her exams were, I tried imitating them a few times. I did get decent results sometimes, but they generally failed —just like the selection exam I'd held at the amusement park the other day.

Thanks to that, the only thing that had gone well was making it look like an accident.

I doubted that Snow White would forgive what I had done. I wasn't expecting to be forgiven, and I didn't even want her to forgive me. It was just too bad. I was sincerely disappointed that I would have to finish off Snow White and Ripple here, and return to my days of seeking my ideal magical girl. They had been such necessary material for actualizing my dreams.

Snow White was supposed to have gotten stronger. She couldn't beat me the way she was now. It truly was regrettable. What a waste—when she was the one person I'd been interested in since Cranberry's death. For her to have to lose her life because of my inattention…

To console myself, I would take the hair of the deceased. I knew it was sentimentality, but it was just so heartrendingly sad. I would take it all, along with the skin of her head. I would process it properly so that it would not rot, and make it just for me. I would store it separately from her file.

I would be able to remember Snow White each time I looked at it. While grinding my coffee beans, I could immerse my soul in memories and slowly pray for the next time I could meet her.

Snow White jumped, cracking open a rock as she went, and I unleashed a flying kick. A little shift to the side would keep something like that from hitting. She moved too wildly. After I'd told her as much, too—but she'd gotten too emotional and was just throwing herself at me.

Breaking the bones of the neck would silence anyone, even if they were moved by anger. I dodged Snow White's attack, and then went for a roundhouse kick at her neck—*whoops*. Something metal came flying at me from under the rocky area, along a trajectory that ignored the laws of physics…a kunai, which I knocked down with my raised right leg.

She could still throw a kunai, even with her arm broken? Ripple, rising up from the river, dripping water, held her sword in her mouth. She swung up her leg—again. The kunai flew, cutting through the spray of water.

Its trajectory was difficult to read, but it was slower than when she threw with her arm. I fluttered my skirt, swiping it down.

Ripple was holding kunai in her toes and throwing them. Tossing off her trademark geta, she stood in a low stance, bending deep on her right knee and even farther at the ankle, reaching with her foot into her cuff or collar to pluck kunai from in between each of her toes.

With her sword in her mouth and kunai in her feet, she was such a violent sight, it overwhelmed any silliness about her appearance—but the light in her eyes was even more intense. If I were to speak figuratively, Snow White's gaze was like a punch, while Ripple's gaze was a lethal stab.

Unlike Snow White, she wouldn't understand why I had attacked, but the pure fact that I had done so was fanning the flames of her anger. Her sword, dripping water, sinisterly reflected the light of the full moon.

Snow White attacked, and Ripple threw her kunai, and I dealt with both as I made to counterattack—but right before my fist connected, I switched to defending from another kunai. The pair were working together rather well. It seemed they hadn't been striking at each other for two months for nothing.

During the exchange, Snow White drew back her foot…but didn't move. As I was anticipating a strike to come, Ripple's kunai flew about wildly, and I was unable to dodge one, blood spurting from my right arm.

I leaped from one boulder to another. They were keeping up with me. Being that this was where they trained, I suppose they had the territorial advantage.

But it wasn't enough. They weren't going to match me by outnumbering me or knowing the territory. I was neither weak enough nor kind enough to lose to some inexperienced children.

Ripple threw not her kunai, but a short sword. It looped like a boomerang, which I easily dodged. That wasn't enough to even be a feint. Avoided.

The next blade she swung at me, I struck, then pretended to kick while I fluttered my skirt to block her vision—it would leave me defenseless against Snow White for a moment, but I knew her range. She would just barely not reach me, and even if she pushed herself to get me, she couldn't hit that hard—my ploy to gouge

Ripple in her blind spot and strike her throat with my toes was interrupted by Snow White's attack. I felt a sharp pain, then spun around and raced up to the rocky area upstream.

Snow White was not unarmed. She was holding the short sword that Ripple had thrown.

I realized: *Aha.* The short sword Ripple had thrown had not been an attack at me. It had been a pass to Snow White. So she had figured out that I was thinking I didn't need to worry too much about Snow White's attacks.

Repelling Snow White's short sword as she pursued me, I barely evaded Ripple's kunai. They were timing their attacks even more closely.

Was Snow White listening to the voice of Ripple's heart? That pass made me think she most certainly had. Their coordination was just too fast.

I sensed that I was being pressed by my two opponents.

Ha-ha. This is so wonderfully strange.

I knew what they were capable of. Not just because of the blood that flowed from my shoulder. They were moving better and better. They were beginning to breathe in sync. They were raising each other up. They were experiencing the unique air of real fight, something that couldn't be gained in practice. And add intense thoughts and feelings to that, and I got the ultimate form of my strategy for raising a magical girl: strength in feeling. Perhaps I shouldn't say this when I was about to be killed, but this brought me such joy.

A kunai skimmed the crystal ball in my left hand. I had no more room for error.

While I was glad, I once again felt disappointed that this was such a waste. Of course Snow White was wonderful—but Ripple was, too. Their feelings being heightened from battle strengthened their desires, the bonds between the pair firm and tight as they struck at me like a single beast.

I kicked off a rock wall to leap off an even higher wall. I crossed paths with Snow White as she leaped from the wall on the opposite side—I blocked her kick with my shin, then did a vertical spin to swipe away a kunai with my skirt. I bounded off the wall on the opposite side, and as Snow White returned in the same manner, we crossed paths again, and she sliced up with the short sword, catching me in the cheek as I kicked down a kunai with my heel. I turned aside Ripple's sword with the back of my hand as she leaped over Snow White's back, and the rock wall behind me was sliced open like tofu.

It was truly regrettable for two magical girls with such aptitude to be killed by someone like me. Oh yes. I would make a decoration using hair from both of them, as a set. I would let them be close, even in death. With their hair gazing at me, I would reflect over the next exam. What a beautiful image of the future.

I clenched my crystal ball hard. There was a hair wrapped around each of my fingers on both hands. In my crystal ball, I reflected the owner of one of those hairs, a girl. She was not a magical girl. She was just a human girl. She didn't have any potential, nor did she have any special abilities. She was an ordinary first grader, snoozing peacefully in her bed.

The essence of my magic was not using my crystal ball to peep—it was to draw the subject reflected in the crystal ball to me. It didn't matter where the subject was. Distance didn't matter, or even what world they were in—I'd pulled out someone who escaped into cyberspace before.

I raced up the stone wall, and when I was near the top of the cliff, I turned back and thrust my right hand into my crystal ball, grabbed the girl's collar, and drew her out. She must have been half-asleep, as she was rubbing her eyes with a blank look.

Snow White's and Ripple's expressions were…yes, that was what I'd wanted to see. Their eyes were wide in shock as they looked up at me and the girl in my grasp.

Snow White and Ripple were both upright girls. They would never have imagined there were hopeless miscreants like me in the world. Some such miscreants were lower than vomit—those who had no shame at all about involving total outsiders for their own purposes.

It wasn't as if I felt no prickles of conscience. After mentally apologizing with a cute *Aw, sorry,* I took action.

I gently tossed the girl from the top of the cliff. Ripple and Snow White, who had been catching up with me, flung themselves down to the bottom of the cliff to go after the girl. It would be all right. They would surely make it. I'd thrown her in order that they make it, after all. The two girls would save her before she struck the ground.

That would be my chance. If they wanted to save the girl, that would inevitably create an opening. To give myself that chance, I was willing to toss a girl who had nothing to do with this from the top of a cliff. I could do it because I was a bastard. It was because I was a bastard that I could win. In order to win, I would stomp on an unrelated weakling and take my victory. If I was up against an ally of justice, then I just had to play a corresponding villain.

I switched the image in my crystal ball. Snow White was cradling the girl in her arms. As for Ripple: When I switched the image, she was already running up the cliff. There they were, two righteous magical girls. My sentimentalism swung to max. *Goodbye, my beloved magical girl. Snow White, I'm replacing you.*

I could drag out the subject reflected in my crystal ball. In what state they were dragged out was up to my own abilities. I could also grab their neck fast enough to break it. No magical girl could move with her neck broken.

Fixing my aim, I quietly inserted my right hand—but the moment I touched Snow White's neck, she flipped around and reached out her arm. Instead of grabbing her neck, I wound up grabbing her arm. On top of that, her short sword stabbed through the back of my hand to my palm—while stabbing her own arm in the process.

My right calf was sliced open at the same time, and I groaned at the shock, falling clumsily. A large shuriken bit into my right calf, stabbing in deeply. It was Ripple's hair clip. Even if I wanted to pull it out, my right hand was pinned down, and my left hand couldn't let go of my crystal ball. I was immobilized.

I sat down. The coldness seeped from the wet ground to my bottom. The wound in my calf was halfway to the bone. I couldn't even crawl properly without my hands.

I breathed heavily, sending oxygen through my blood. The cold mountain air hurt my lungs.

How had Snow White seen through my attack? I had hidden my presence. She couldn't possibly have read my *hand's* mind. But the way she moved, I could only assume she'd read my mind… *Ah, I see.*

I'd hidden my presence to slowly sneak up behind Snow White, my right hand in her blind spot. But someone else had seen that hand—the girl in Snow White's arms. Despite being in a whirlpool of confusion, she'd been looking. Even with only the light of the moon, this close, she would at least have seen that something had come flying. She must have felt that something would be trouble for her.

Even if she had cried out or shown Snow White with a gesture, it wouldn't have made it in time. Snow White had heard the voice of her heart and reacted directly, grabbing my arm, and Ripple had acted in concert with her, removing her hair clip to throw it at me.

I could hear footsteps racing up the stone wall. As for myself, it really didn't seem as if I could get up.

Ripple and Snow White had managed to use even a bastard like me. The harsher and more painful things became in the future, the stronger and more polished they would become.

How fun it was to think about their future.

How sad it was to not be able to see that future.

If my fate was to be relieved of my post at this point, then nothing could be crueler. Despite having managed to halfway fulfill my goal of creating the ideal magical girl, I was leaving the scene in the middle, without being involved until the end. It was a tragedy.

I could not become my ideal magical girl. I was rotten to the core, and I was never going to cry or repent or suddenly discover my inner justice. I could say that for certain. But even so, I'd always sought my ideal magical girl. She was a super magical girl who would destroy the Magical Kingdom, which only thought of magical girls as mere experimental animals, from the inside. She was a magical girl who could pull off what I was unable to do. I had taken on the role of teacher, mentoring, and tried to create my ideal magical girl: one who would stand at my side and become my ultimate partner in facing off against the Magical Kingdom. If only I'd had a little more time—just a little more.

Racing up toward me, Ripple was like a beast. She was smeared in blood, but she ignored her wounds, the flames of her rage blazing brightly. Loose and disheveled hair fluttering, she was hunting down the magical girl called Pythie Frederica. Sometimes, wild hair can be more beautiful than a neat hairdo. That beauty gave my inspiration a kick.

I came up with an idea. Magical-Girl Hunter. It would be fine for Ripple, but it also seemed it would suit Snow White. I thought it would be quite the nice nickname. I didn't know if she would listen, but I would try suggesting it.

Shufflin Learns to Dance

This story takes place before the events of *Magical Girl Raising Project ACES*.

Debut

Monthly Magical Girl Raising Project on
This Manga is Amazing! WEB

Shufflin Learns to Dance

When your boss summons you to their office by name, you get nervous. Even if said boss was fairly understanding yesterday, there was no guarantee they'd be equally understanding today.

Hamuel knocked on the thick, black-lacquered wooden door, and after receiving a reply, she said "Pardon me" and went inside.

It had a dark-gray carpet, a dark-brown president's desk, and a sideboard and bookshelf of the same color; the only decoration was the classical clock on the table. All the colors in the room were extremely bland, including that of the room's occupant, who wore a slate-colored suit. He looked like a jaded businessman, but he was actually a mage. At the center of the desk was a laptop, the light of its screen illuminating his expressionless face.

"Thanks for coming, Hamuel. First, I want you to look at this."

Hamuel moved next to him and looked down at the laptop screen. It had various links in garish fonts—No new reports, Favorites, Click here for the top rankings, Live broadcast, Recommended posts, Magi-magi News, Magical Girl Festival! All Hit Series Here!—along with tons of pictures from magical-girl anime.

Her boss's expression remained unchanged as he faced the laptop, his fingers laced in front of him Hamuel maintained a similarly stoic expression as she nodded. There was something oddly comedic about a middle-aged man gazing sternly at a silly website, but Hamuel wasn't so immature that she would burst out laughing. She eyed the screen with the same ultra-serious look as her boss.

"This is Magi-magi Video, the video-hosting site for Magical Kingdom personnel, right?" she said.

There were a number of websites that could be viewed only by those who possessed magical aptitude. Ordinary people couldn't know about them, and they wouldn't be logged in the Internet archives. A magical girl who was the former head of the IT

Department had developed the technology to filter any outsiders. Even now that said magical girl had been kicked out of her position for criminal activity, the technology had all been passed on and was still being used.

Magi-magi Video had been established for communication among Magical Kingdom personnel. Announcement of research results, advertisement of products, canvassing for your faction, official streams of magical-girl anime, and other official matters were just about 10 percent of the content, and the other 90 percent were hobby videos.

Her boss scrolled and clicked a number of times with practiced movements, going through the trending page to go to a channel page. It was titled “Puk’s Page,” with a long list of videos that read “Live broadcast on X day, X month,” with different dates marked.

“As you can see, the Puk Faction is posting videos,” said her boss.

He clicked on a video to play it.

It looked like some sort of conflict zone. In the center of the screen, beside a fallen street sign with concrete rubble scattered around, there was a figure. The camera gradually zoomed in, and the figure grew larger.

It was a girl. She looked less than ten years old. Hamuel let out a little breath. Magical girls were all beautiful when they transformed, but even being one herself, she thought this one’s beauty seemed a head or two above the rest. Her distinctive tartan skirt and very idol-esque school uniform didn’t look cheap at all. She was indeed like an idol in the literal sense. The girl hugged a ribboned mic to her chest like something precious as she gave a little bow. The ribbon at her waist and her full golden hair bounced like living things.

The music started. It was an idol song from the 00s. The girl began to sing while performing the sort of idol-style dance you’d expect. Not only was the girl beautiful and charming, Hamuel felt an unconcealable holiness—sublimity, even—in her smile and the way she moved. She didn’t even need to look at the tags—“IRL goddess,” “her singing is a gift,” “so glad Lady Puk seems to be enjoying herself”—to know who this girl was. She was the leader of the Puk Faction and the incarnation of one of the Three Sages: the magical girl Puk Puck.

After about thirty seconds, Hamuel’s boss clicked the BACK button. “We’ve received reports that viewing this video for long periods of time has a negative effect on mental health,” he said.

Hamuel had just been thinking she wished she could have seen a bit more, and she squirmed in her seat. She’d almost been sucked in. This was exactly why you couldn’t let your guard down with the Puk Faction.

“When Puk posts, she takes the top of the daily ranking in everything: views, comments, and favorites,” Hamuel’s boss told her.

“That’s pretty amazing.”

“So we’re going to be working on a counterstrategy.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“On the day when a Puk video is planned to be uploaded, we’ll hit back with a video of our own and steal the top video ranking.”

“Hmm.”

“You’re going to make a video and post it for us. You don’t need to worry about craft. We’ll leave that to the supervisor and director.”

The boss’s lips contorted just slightly. A breath leaked out the corner of his mouth.

“The Osk Faction’s been in dire straits ever since the mainstream faction that backed Grim Heart made that mess. Our supporters decrease day by day, and our forces are at three quarters of where they were previously. And the bad image follows us around, no matter what we do or where. We’d like to wipe that away, somehow. We want to show off that we’re not like the old Osks—we’re a clean faction.”

“So that means this?”

The boss nodded, and his subordinate nodded back. The mainstream faction getting themselves ruined had opened up the organization a bit, but vertical relations were still strict, and the Osk Faction’s forceful, top-down methods hadn’t really changed. As a newbie manager, Hamuel had no right to refuse even the strangest orders. Sometimes, she just had to put on a serious look and do it, even if she was thinking with exasperation how ridiculous it was. Hamuel was well aware of this.

“The old guard must see this as making a gesture toward the masses. I was given a biting look and told to make this succeed, no matter what.”

“Oh my…”

"Hamuel, I'm entrusting you with a full set of Shufflin IIs. I want you to produce a wonderful video that says *Here we are, the Osk Faction,* and concentrate on a PR campaign."

She had the equipment. She had the personnel. She had even gotten them to lend her a studio. The Puk Faction had certainly made full use of their funds to put together nothing but the highest-quality products. It was by preparing enough of the same that they'd be able to stand in the same arena for the first time.

It was very ridiculous. But it was also an opportunity. Hamuel had no accomplishments, no credits to her name. She would make this video production her first accomplishment and her foothold to success. At some later date, it would certainly be announced during a meeting that this was the sort of thing they were doing for their image improvement campaign. While it would be out of the question to make a boring video that was exposed and tank her reputation, if Hamuel made a wonderful video that anyone approved of, then her reputation would go up, and she would be entrusted with more important work.

The Shufflin II's greatest strength was their numbers: They came in a set of fifty-two. Furthermore, being a singular unit to start with gave them a sense of unity that set them apart from just getting together a big crowd of people. Hamuel checked the videos on the site that were particularly popular and thoroughly researched the trends of videos that were liked. She counted the views, number of comments, and favorites by each video genre, and after discarding let's plays, experimental videos, sports videos, animal videos, AMVs, etc., what remained in the end were song covers and dance covers—and realizing that the fatal flaw of singing together was that they all had the same vocal quality, she picked a dance cover. She got a pro to do the choreography. The Osk Faction connections were deep and broad.

"You, over there! Stay in sync! One, two, one, two… You're falling behind!"

Hamuel's magic radio was good for directing groups. She could give individual directions, prompt the attention of the whole, and send messages to certain suits. This meticulous instruction-giving couldn't be accomplished just from yelling through a megaphone and was made possible by the magic radio, and Hamuel's skill to use it well.

Taking into account Magi-magi Video's demographics, they selected the cute, poppy, and up-tempo hit *Daisy Carnival* as the background music, which was widely known as the opening theme of *Magical Daisy* season two. Plenty of magical-girl anime were more well-known, but *Magical Daisy* had them beat as far as the number of surreal AMVs was concerned. On Magi-magi Video, the song was even more widely recognized than *Cutie Healer* or *Star Queen*.

"Make it happy! And fun! And cute! You all should be able to do it! Okay, one, two!"

The Shufflins had their quirks, too. The hearts were cowardly but expressive. The clubs' movements were sharp, and the spades were good at action. The diamonds weren't good at dancing, but they were essential for shooting, sound, editing, and other tasks. Hamuel gave instructions to the majority or to individuals using her radio, going for even more refined motion, charming gestures, and group beauty. She sweated with the Shufflins, worried over things with them, and watched from the shadows as they secretly practiced on their own. After a whole month of struggles, the video was finally complete.

Objectively speaking, it was a great dance cover video. It had perfectly coordinated dancing that only the Shufflins, all as one, could execute. The background was professionally done CG. The Shufflins danced in a mysterious forest drawn with avant-garde and psychedelic colors, with a giant caterpillar and a Cheshire cat watching over them. The club corps came to the front, then moved to the back, swapping places with the hearts as they came up, and then the video zoomed in on the cherubic expression of the Two of Hearts. The black team and the red team went forward at a diagonal, passing by each other without colliding, then changed direction at a forty-five degree diagonal, and the black and red passed by each other once more. Then they jumped, jumped, threw up their hands, did a spin to the side, and a spin vertically. It was wonderful.

Once it was all over, Hamuel wiped the sweat off her forehead. The Two and Three of Hearts were so moved that they burst into tears—Hamuel gently patted their backs, offered an appreciative "Good job," and bowed her head. She gave each and every Shufflin a firm handshake, and they complimented each other.

Hamuel input the title of the video: “Shufflin Learns to Dance.” It was Friday night, around when there would be the greatest influx of viewers, and also the moment when Puk Puck’s video submission was scheduled. Hamuel also didn’t forget to casually mention the Osk Faction’s name in the description. She went frame by frame to select the best shot for the video thumbnail, ultimately settling on the Ace of Hearts jumping in the air with a big smile.

So then now for the view count and the comment count. Would it be a lot, or not so many? Her future would be decided based on this number. Heart racing with hope and unease, Hamuel opened up the video page. Magi-magi Video showed viewer comments in real time, making it clear at a glance if a video was popular. So would it—?

Ohhh…wonderful.

It was better than expected. Just by refreshing the video page once, the view count and the number of comments went up by a hundred, a thousand. All the comments were positive. Comments saying the Ace of Hearts was cute came in succession, only to be swallowed by the group of comments saying the Jack of Spades was cool. The Shufflins gathered around Hamuel also chittered their innocent glee as they commented on the video with their magical phones.

Confirming her success, Hamuel refreshed the page once more. There were even more views and comments. Refresh it again, and they went further up and up. At this rate, maybe they really could make it to the top-trending videos. The number of comments continued to increase, becoming such a deluge that it was even hard to read the comments saying the Ace of Hearts was cute as they flowed right to left, and the comments saying the Jack of Spades was cool became a greater river that flowed from right to left.

…Huh?

Hamuel cocked her head. Something felt off. She refreshed the page once again. There were even more *“the Ace of Hearts is cute”* and *“the Jack of Spades is cool”* comments. She peeked at the magical phone belonging to the Four of Hearts, who was right beside her, commenting on the video: The Four of Hearts is cute. Hamuel then peeked at the magical phone of the Seven of Clubs, who was typing in another comment: The Seven of Clubs is so elegant.

Hamuel face-palmed.

All the comments were so uniform, with no individuality to be seen. Hamuel had *thought* these were what people called a "barrage of scrolling comments," but upon closer inspection, it was nothing but the most bare-bones compliments, like "cool," "cute," "elegant," "great," and "awesome."

Hamuel's magical phone alerted her to a new message with a *ding*. It was from the research team:

The Shufflin video was great. Our Shufflin prototypes and the Shufflin IIs are so glad, they're commenting on it.

Her phone *ding*ed again. It was from the captain of the engineering unit, which was made up of diamond Shufflins:

I saw the Shufflin video. The Shufflin dance was super cute. Our girls are so happy, they're commenting, too.

Hamuel got another notification, but she didn't bother checking anymore. She went back to the video page, and when she refreshed it, there were even more views and comments. The comments were all uniform, a barrage of comments like a meteor shower was flowing from right to left. The comments all said the same thing and were submitted at the same moments. It was just like the same person had made a large volume of comments.

Could this perhaps be…an incredibly large-scale sock puppet operation?

Hamuel looked up at the sky and wondered how she would tell her boss about this. Unable to come up with any ideas, she posted a single comment on the Shufflin video: The Ace of Hearts is magi-cool.

The Archfiend Cram School's Christmas Party from Hell

This story takes place shortly after the events of *Magical Girl Raising Project.*

Debut

Monthly Magical Girl Raising Project on
This Manga is Amazing! WEB

The Archfiend Cram School's Christmas Party from Hell

◇ Lethe

There was a magical girl group called the Archfiend Cram School. Lead by Archfiend Pam, the strongest magical girl, the organization was half private school, half gang of hooligans—warriors, violent extremists, mobsters, sadists, truth-seekers, neighborhood bullies, old-timey gangsters, mercenaries, philosophers, good-for-nothings, megalomaniacs, overenthusiastic LARPers, and various magical girls who believed in might.

Some of them sought status in society, some wanted people to fight; others yearned to be the strongest, while yet others were just doing it for self-satisfaction. They honed their strength and technique, competing with each other as they aimed for the top.

The Archfiend Cram School swelled in size and even came to have influence over the Magical Kingdom. But then the exposure of the Cranberry incident caused it to suddenly shrink. Archfiend Pam was demoted, the group was asked to refrain from meeting for the time being, all the students could do was complain to each other about their anxieties for the future, while the graduates who were in positions to receive paychecks focused on their jobs, for fear of demotion or firing, which could fall upon them at any moment.

A while after the incident came to light, by the time things were starting to calm down in their sphere, being an Archfiend Cram School alum was no longer a shining honor. These days, it was like a gangster calling themselves fresh out of prison, and word had it everyone involved was sighing.

The influence of the Archfiend Cram School was gradually fading. Then one day that winter, everyone got a letter from an unknown sender—Cram School graduates, current students, magical girls who had often participated in events, and even up-and-coming magical girls who were rumored to be just as strong as Cram School graduates.

Bordered with an illustration of a Christmas wreath, the letters of invitation to the party looked like charming Christmas cards. But right from the first line, it made those who saw it crinkle their eyes, or relax their expressions into a smile. They read, *Notifying you of the Archfiend Cram School Christmas Party.*

In her room in an Osk Faction branch, Lethe accepted the invitation. She ran her eyes across the letter three times—and then this long-awaited event made her crack a crooked smile.

◇ vs. Archfiend Pam

The bare concrete room featured a steel table, two leather-upholstered round stools, a bookshelf that filled a whole wall lined with books like the Bible and myths in their original languages, and nothing else. This incredibly barren interior, like the room of a prisoner or someone under confinement, forced a sense of the owner's character and made visitors feel anxious.

But just for that day, that tense feeling was upset by silliness. The owner of this space, Archfiend Pam, was wearing a round red fake nose, had fake reindeer antlers on top of her two horns, a brown shawl around her shoulders, and even had reins around her neck. She deemed herself Christmas Archfiend Pam, Reindeer Version, and suppressed the smile that threatened to break out.

"I would ask that you not laugh. This is work." Archfiend Pam scowled.

Lethe's veil fluttered as she waved a hand. "Oh, pardon me. It's just so charming."

"I have to attend the Department of Diplomacy's Christmas party dressed as a reindeer."

"Orders from above are always absurd."

"Indeed. It's not even Christmastime, and to wear such a festive outfit… I would have preferred home confinement, if possible, but I'm not even allowed that."

"You're not going to go to that party?"

"Unfortunately, I am not." Pam sounded disappointed, but her face was tense.

Lethe tilted her head, and when her veil was about to slide down, she flicked it back to its original position. “I’m sure everyone will be disappointed if the host doesn’t participate.”

“I’m not the host. I also received an invitation.”

Lethe automatically responded with an astonished, “Oh-ho.”

Pam nodded back, her expression equal parts apologetic and bitter. “If it’s a prank or a joke, then that’s fine. But worst case, this could well be a terroristic threat to the school,” she said. “Plenty of people resent us, after all. There have always been lots, but now there are even more.”

“Then just order the students not to go.”

“If the students were to find out that someone threw this event without permission, then it would turn into a hunt for the culprit and cause trouble for everyone involved. These people all have far too much energy.”

“That’s entirely true.”

“I’m repeating myself here, but it’s fine if nothing happens when we go to the venue. But if this event actually happens, that presents nothing but problems. I do intend to reach out to some people I can trust and have them do something like security, but making things safe is always difficult.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“If something does happen, we’ll use magic to eliminate the disaster and discover the culprit if possible… Can I ask that of you? I know it’s a presumptuous request.” Archfiend Pam put her hands on her knees and bowed her head.

Perhaps she meant to be making a very polite request, but with her fake reindeer antlers poking Lethe, this felt more like a threat.

Lethe chuckled. She didn’t mind how oblivious Pam could be.

Lethe thought for a moment, then poked the end of Pam’s antlers, with a little smile.

“Whatever their goal may be, it’s rather whimsical to declare it a Christmas party and gather all these people.”

Archfiend Pam raised her head with a questioning look. “Yes it is, now that you mention it.”

“And writing invitations and disseminating them would take quite a lot of time and effort, with this many people. Many magical girls must have been difficult to locate, myself at the top of the list.”

“Indeed.”

“If you’re looking for someone whimsical with extra time on their hands…wouldn’t I also fit the conditions of the culprit?”

Archfiend Pam turned to Lethe with an ultra-serious look, drew back her chin, and placed her hands on her knees. “No, you are not the culprit.”

“Mm, indeed I am not.” Lethe hid a smile behind her fan.

Drawn by that smile, Pam also just barely cracked one of her own.

◇ vs. Cockle

Passing through the ancient-looking gates, she emerged at the venue. It was dark all around, and even with magical-girl eyes, you couldn’t see through it. But the air felt unexpectedly light—sweet, even. This was no ordinary space. She’d already done her research and found out that it was a villa, once owned by an aristocrat of the Magical Kingdom. When the owner had died, there had been inheritance disputes, and currently the ownership was unclear. So that meant whoever knew the place and was using it casually was the culprit here.

Maybe she should imagine something less sinister of the culprit. It was probably a prank by a graduate, though this was pretty involved for that. But though they seemed fixated on the situation here, she sensed no malice. The venue had a very lively turnout. The four-hundred-yard square box-shaped structure and its garden were cramped, with nothing imaginative about their design. It went beyond plain to just poor-looking. But the decorations were dazzling, shining with a rainbow of electric lights, tinsel reflecting the glow to drive off the surrounding darkness.

Having spent her days wildly slashing and stabbing at each other with a smile, both within the Osk Faction and without, Lethe was somewhat sensitive to a certain type of unease. And she really didn’t feel any ill intent, after all. So then was this a prank? Pam herself had to be thinking that this was 99 percent likely to be a prank by a Cram School graduate. That was exactly why she was leaving this to Lethe, rather than handling it herself. And for Lethe, this was a fine opportunity. Searching for a culprit—she’d always wanted to try that. She thought Pam may well have known she did, when she’d asked.

Even though it was outside the venue, magical girls were overflowing, and there were even stalls out. The sign in a rounded font that read CHANGE INTO A CHRISTMAS COSTUME had to be Styler Mimi's. The remodeled car roaring around kicking up dust belonged to Mina Madgardener Acre. The wave of earth running alongside the remodeled car was Pathos Nomilina, Ruler of the Surging Seas, the one scattering powder snow up above was Icy Puree, and the black silk hat applauding and cheering was Moru-Moru Morgue. There were a lot of magical girls who were famous enough that even Lethe, who was not a student of the school, would think, "Oh, it's her" when she saw them.

Since she was coming secretly, as usual, even if she was an authority of the Osk Faction, Lethe had no retinue. She would like to think that was for the best and enjoy herself casually, but she had to stay on her toes today.

When she handed her letter of invitation to the reception by the entrance, the receptionist leaned into her ear and whispered, "I hear that the Archfiend has asked you to search for the culprit. We searched every cranny of the facility, but there were no kind of tricks or traps."

Lethe looked back at the receptionist. It was a magical girl in a Santa suit. She'd seen that face before. Taking a good look at her visage, when the girl averted her eyes in displeasure, she finally remembered.

"Oh, that's it," said Lethe. "You're the assassin who launched that ill-advised attack on the Archfiend during that Survival Exercise some time ago. They say she turned the tables on you, and you were forced into an Archfiend-style rehabilitation program and were coughing up blood."

Since normally she was all in black, it had taken some time to remember.

The magical girl Cockle seemed reluctant, but also slightly triumphant as she looked back at Lethe and snorted. "What a nasty way to put it."

"It's a fact that the Archfiend put the screws in you. And have you been forced to spy this time, too?"

"Well, I obviously can't refuse."

"Indeed so. By the way, do you have any idea who the culprit is?"

"That's your job to find out."

"Hmm…that is also indeed so."

◇ vs. Auro

Inside the building was even more dazzling than outside. There were lots of electric lights, in the center of the big hall was a mini-tree planted in a big plant pot, and the ceiling and walls were packed with all sorts of Christmas-originating decorations. And the turnout was massive.

Though she had guessed it from seeing the magical girls overflowing outside, there were even more than she had anticipated. Searching for the culprit among these was going to be exhausting.

It's no easy feat…being a detective.

Looking around, she figured for starters, she would try hitting up those she knew, and the first thing her eye hit on was a large sphere of hair. The hair, which was normally all silver, was now dyed in red, green, and white. She was just tilting back a wineglass in the corner, but she stood out whether she liked it or not. She was Auro, a magical girl with a magical afro.

"It's been a while," said Lethe.

"Oh my, Duchess," Auro replied. "So you'll come to a commoner's party for Christmas?"

"Informal gatherings are equally comfortable for the aristocracy. More importantly…" Leaning in, she hid her lips with her fan. She used her magic to distort the distance between them, making the noise around them grow distant. "Have you heard that the host of this gathering is not the Archfiend?"

"Huh? It's not?" Her afro bobbled, her expression sincere surprise. She didn't look like she was lying. "So then who the heck is?"

"That's what I would like to know."

"It's not me."

"I've figured that much out."

"Actually, wouldn't it be bad for that sort of information to leak to the person you're trying to investigate?"

"Hmm. Yes, that's a theory: concealing that you're gathering information. Although I suppose I can look the other way in this instance."

"You're really letting yourself off the hook here."

"Never mind such trifles. You don't have any ideas about who the culprit is, do you?"

Shaking her big afro back and forth, Auro gazed into thin air for a while, then nodded. “No clue.”

“You sound rather certain. What happened to the group that’s always with you? It seems they’re not here today.”

“You suspect them? Well unfortunately for you, they can’t commit any crimes right now.”

“And that means?”

“Negino is busy with the usual. And…” Auro put a hand to her lips and lowered her voice a notch, almost whispering, “One of my friends has taken Cranberry’s exam.”

“My, oh my…I feel sorry for her.”

“She’s so depressed. I feel bad, so another friend’s been with her the whole time.”

“You don’t have to be with her?”

“I have to pack food and drinks here into Tupperware and go to my friend’s house.”

Lethe couldn’t really tell if she was being a great friend or not here, but that was not the problem at hand right now. “You have no idea who might be suspicious, aside from your friends?”

“Hmm. I do figure you have to be a pretty whimsical person to use the pretext of Christmas to hold a party this big and get people together. I’d never go to all this trouble.”

“I suppose that’s so.”

◇ vs. Maiya

If anyone connected to the Archfiend Cram School was widely acknowledged as a whimsical prankster, it would be those two, she thought, zeroing in on them and searching them out. She found them immediately. They were sprawled side by side on a sofa in the food and drink corner. They were not playing aristocrats of ancient Rome; they were simply drunk. Monako was jangling her khakkara as she loudly trashed Cranberry, earning herself cold looks from everyone around. Amy was hugging one of her nine tails and putting on a cutesy voice like a coquettish fox and getting tepid looks.

They didn’t seem to be plotting or scheming, but it did appear that getting too close would lead to getting dragged in. Deciding to leave them be, Lethe accepted a champagne and a cracker, which she bit into. It wasn't bad. Next, she brought her lips to the champagne. She scowled. This was not ordinary alcohol.

Looking back at the magical girl with a bandanna and an apron, she saw the staff that was leaning near her side, and the wrinkle in her brow deepened. She was such a committed warrior type—a serving job did not suit her.

"Maiya," said Lethe. "What are you doing?"

"The same as Cockle. I'm playing staff as I work security. Aren't you doing that, too, Duchess?"

Despite her attire, there was not a drop of service spirit in Maiya's expression as she puffed out her chest.

Lethe did not enjoy dealing with Maiya. She was serious, uptight, and rarely fun. As someone who joined in various events for amusement's sake, Lethe thought they had very different values. Being that she was a servant of some noble family of the Osk Faction, she seemed vaguely aware of Lethe's origins. She may have thought she was being considerate, often speaking to her in an overfamiliar manner and making her sit through long conversations, such as complaints about work or uninteresting tactical theory.

Judging that it would be acceptable to wrap this up after informing her of business and some small talk, Lethe dropped her eyes to her cup.

"Mm-hmm…but this champagne."

"It would have been nice to get champagne glasses, but they only have wineglasses here," said Maiya.

"That's not what I mean. There's magic cast on it—so that it can get magical girls drunk."

"Surprised? This champagne is specially made to make anyone feel good."

"So that's why Amy and Monako are down."

"It only took a little to get them like that. Quite pathetic, for Archfiend Cram School graduates."

"Come on, don't say that. So there wasn't anyone suspicious?"

"Suspicious…well, it was the host who arranged for this alcohol."

"I see…so it's someone who can arrange for special alcohol that can get magical girls drunk."

"Exactly. She either has a route for acquiring such a thing, or a means of producing it herself. Oh, your glass is empty! Come on, one more glass. Haven't you ever heard that it's rude to just have one? You’re the last person I’d expect that from… Oh yes, you have underlings, of course—some subordinates. I’d like to ask you about something… Yes, it’s about how to associate with such people. I also have one magical girl subordinate as a student, but I just don’t feel like I’m communicating well with her… Look, your glass is empty again. Let’s have another. Hey, where are you going? I’m not done talking. So then about my subordinate-student. She’s a good person, but she really tends to play her cards close to her chest. Just a little while ago, over whether *tsuchinoko* were real or not—”

◇ Lady Proud

The key word “alcohol” reminded her of something. Lady Proud from the Department of Diplomacy had drunk with Archfiend Pam before, and Lethe seemed to recall that she’d been able to create magic alcohol that could even get magical girls drunk. But Archfiend Pam was going to that Department of Diplomacy party. So then wouldn’t Lady Proud also not have come…? Or so Lethe assumed, but contrary to expectations, she was there. She was in front of a giant Christmas cake with her arms folded.

It was rare for Lady Proud to participate in events, and Lethe had never really had a proper conversation with her. But she’d heard that in sharing a workplace with Archfiend Pam, she had actually made friends with her. Lethe had been thinking she’d like to try talking to her, if she had the chance.

“Is something the matter?” Lethe asked.

With just a glance toward the voice that came at her from behind, Lady Proud turned back to the cake.

“I’m thinking,” she replied.

“About what?”

“About this cake.”

As they talked, magical girls cut up the cake and placed it on plates. The amount of cake was gradually decreasing—like a sugar candy being swarmed by ants.

“It’ll be gone very quickly, if it goes at this pace,” said Lethe. You’re not going to have any?”

“I’ve already had some.”

“Then what are you worrying about?”

“I’m worrying about whether I should have another slice or not."

"Hmm?"

"This is clearly no ordinary cake. There's spells cast on each one of the ingredients—the sponge cake, the cream—and it's filled with energy. And it has so many subtle, wonderful flavors that only a magical girl's tongue could differentiate… This cake was most likely made for magical girls."

"Oh-ho. So then perhaps I'll have a slice, too."

"However!"

"However?"

"Just as alcohol made for magical girls will get magical girls drunk, wouldn't cake made for magical girls be able to get magical girls fat? Won't these calories that we'd normally never consume cause us to look unseemly? Thinking about that, a second slice…"

Lethe drew back the hand that was reaching for the cake. Arms still folded, Proud worried and groaned, started reaching out with her right hand anyway, then stopped it with her left, waffling with everything she had. And all the while, the cake was slowly losing pieces, and then finally, the Santa Claus decoration was taken away.

"If it's bothering you that much, why not have some?" said Lethe.

"But…but…!"

Lethe heard footsteps run up, and then a magical girl in a raincoat was hugging around Lady Proud's waist. She didn't even try to hide her excitement, shoulders heaving as she cried, "They're making special Christmas parfaits over there!"

There wasn't even the slightest hesitation. Lady Proud loudly declared, "Always room for that!" then ran off with the raincoat magical girl in her arms.

◇ Twin Dragons Panas

Thinking about sake had made her think of Lady Proud. But there was magicked food aside from the alcohol. If you were going to prepare different types of foodstuffs, rather than making it with one kind of magic, wouldn't it be easier to make use of connections? And the Archfiend School had people with connections.

Outside the venue, in the center of the garden, was a street stall. A magical girl with a blue necktie wrapped around her forehead was serving ramen, and beside her, a sad-looking, green-haired magical girl went on cutting green onions.

"It's been a long time," said Lethe.

"Oh…it's the Duchess."

"Why are you outside?"

"They begged me to do it outside since the smell is so strong, and I was left without a choice… And I can agree that nothing beats stall ramen eaten under a chilly sky, so I'm not unhappy."

The green-haired magical girl Negino gave Panas a plainly unhappy look, but Panas didn't take the slightest notice. She drained the hot water from the noodles with flowing gestures and poured the broth in the bowl.

"This is my special Christmas spiny lobster ramen. Eat up," said Panas.

Lethe bit into the shell of the spiny lobster, and though it was annoyingly difficult to eat, it didn't taste bad. In fact, it was good.

"Is your menu only ramen?"

"Even focused purely on ramen, I still have a long way to go."

"Where do you get your ingredients?"

Panas lifted her head and looked at Lethe. She was almost glaring. The harshness in her eyes was deep and heavy. "You want my distribution route?"

"No, that's not what I—"

"This isn't an attempt to get into the business, is it?"

"What business are you talking about?"

"The magical girl ramen business, of course."

Swallowing the words that just about popped out of her mouth, Lethe groaned under her breath. If that was a business, then it was an incredibly niche one.

"You were just thinking this business is too limited, weren't you?" Panas accused.

"Can you read minds?"

"This business isn't limited. It's broad, in fact. Even I'm not at the top. There's a supreme ramen artisan magical girl I have great respect for, someone worthy of being called a divine master of ramen, who is still far above me. I could never reach her, no matter how much I try. Do you know how many get into this for simplistic reasons, like because they think they can make a quick buck, or because it's cool—then go bust?"

"I'm not interested in getting into this, though."

"If you are interested… Yeah, first, you should become my apprentice. You learn the heavy responsibility of an artisan when you take that first step on a long road. After that, if you still want to make ramen, want to live for ramen, then I may consider it."

"I'm not interested in getting into this."

"Then good."

Panas resumed draining the noodles as if nothing had happened, then cheerfully offered the ramen to a new customer with a "Here, thanks for waiting." She was chatting happily with a magical girl who looked bluish all over. A regular, apparently. Lethe asked herself, *"Would this ramen maniac deal in ingredients unrelated to ramen?"* and in a split second, answered her own question: *"Definitely not."*

◇ vs. Cutie Altair

Perhaps she had been too fixated on connections related to foodstuffs.

Someone who simply had many connections, and not purely with ingredients, could secure a venue, decorate it, and know the whereabouts of persons related to the School and send them invitations. And if she was talking connections, there was one magical girl who might be called the best. It was Cutie Altair from the PR Department, the most booming of all the magical girl–related departments—and she was the center of the Animation Department, the star of all the departments.

A Cutie Healer had to be strong. Of course, some of them tried to join the Archfiend Cram School. And of those, Cutie Altair was most notoriously strong among both insiders and outsiders. A lot of fans were happy about a Cutie Healer being strong in reality. In other words, that meant that she had a lot of cooperators when needed. If she was going to make something happen, she'd have plenty willing to help. The girl herself was extremely unsociable and wary. She didn't even open her heart to fellow students. But Lethe had heard that when that was coupled with her outstanding ability, people took it as "being cool and not trying to pander to the fans."

But when Lethe actually tried to look for her, she couldn't find her. Despite being in an attention-getting position, she hated standing out, and she often covered her costume with a coat and even put on sunglasses. So, relying on supposed eyewitness reports of “I saw someone who looked like that over there” or “No, she was over here,” she wandered left and right until she reached a magical girl hugging a piece of colored paper to her chest.

In contrast with her overall cute costume, with a budding flower decoration and white student-style uniform, she was so stoic, Lethe couldn’t tell if she had any expression at all. Or more like she was just gloomy. Despite how the girl emitted a “don’t talk to me” aura from her whole body, Lethe figured she could at least ask her where Altair was. Lethe had been accused of being self-serving, but she’d never failed to make a good decision.

“Is Altair this way?” Lethe asked.

“She—”

The colored paper the magical girl offered up had “Cutie Altair” autographed on it in cursive style. Lethe almost laughed, thinking that even someone like that would do something nice for a fan, then noticed that the hands of the girl holding the colored paper were trembling slightly, and cleared her throat to cover it.

“—wrote this for me.”

“Oh-ho, that’s nice.”

“Yes. I was dragged to this party…but something nice has happened.”

Every single word she said sounded depressing. Lethe put on a smile and held her veil down with a hand. “Mm. So then where is Altair?”

“She went to the entrance, saying she was leaving for the day.”

Lethe wanted to snipe at Altair for being so uncooperative as usual, but of course she couldn’t bring herself to say such a thing in front of a fan. Lethe put on the appropriate airs as she nodded. Thinking about who to ask next, she was about to leave when a voice came at her from behind, and she turned around.

The magical girl with the flower decoration was looking at Lethe with a faint heat in her eyes. “I can hear the thoughts of people in need.”

Hearing that out of the blue, Lethe didn’t know what to say. She responded by raising her right eyebrow.

“Nobody here is thinking anything bad. Nobody is trying to do anything bad, or thinking they would be in trouble if it were found out. Everyone is having fun.”

The magical girl with the flower decoration gave a little bow of her head, and Lethe gave her a composed nod. As she was thinking about what to say, the person she'd mentioned, the one who'd "forced her to come," showed up. A very intimidating magical girl with one eye and one arm approached in a hurry and told her "Rikkabelle is over there," then took her hand. The two magical girls trotted off, and seeing them firmly holding each other's hands, Lethe broke into a smile. She then pressed her index finger to her cheeks. Smirking would soil her reputation.

The two magical girls disappeared into the crowd, but Lethe stood there for a while, looking off the way they had gone.

The eyes of the magical girl with the flower decoration had looked purely gloomy and depressed. But when she'd said that nobody here was thinking anything bad, her eyes had been so clear and pure, Lethe had felt momentarily pinned. But there had also been strength in them, the strength of having seen more than just the beautiful things. But neither were her eyes wild. It was less that it felt okay to believe her, and more that Lethe wanted to believe her. The fact was that in her investigation thus far, nobody had seemed suspicious. So then, she would decide there was no miscreant. And with that, her detective work was at an end. Now she might as well enjoy herself here, too.

First, she would try out that special Christmas parfait.

◇ Styler Mimi

It was after the festival. The magical girls were leaving in small groups, and at the end, three remained.

Styler Mimi, with her wings dyed in Christmas colors, tilted her head to the right, tilted it left, cut across the neat rows of garbage bags, approached a sofa, lifted a leg, and kicked it away with zero hesitation or restraint.

One of the two magical girls who had been snoring loudly on the sofa, Amy, spun around, then spread her many large tails for a fluffy landing. Monako vanished for an instant, and then glaring at Mimi with blatant anger on her face, she appeared again on her knees in the place where the sofa had been.

The sofa hit the wall and bounced off, then rolled on the floor.

"What the hell are you doing?!" Monako yelled.

“That’s what I’d like to ask!”

Monako rattled her khakkara and leaned in, while Mimi put her hands to her hips and leaned in as well, and their foreheads clunked together as they glared at each other.

In a drawn-out manner of speaking that didn't suit the occasion, Amy asked, "Why are you so mad?"

"Of course I'm going to be mad!" Mimi cried.

"Don't you spit on me, Styler!" Monako snapped back.

"If you don't like it, then back off!"

"What was that?"

"Drop dead."

"Now, now." Amy consoled the angry pair as she cut between them. Monako looked like she was ready to jump on Mimi at any moment, while Amy stood with her back to Monako, spreading her arms facing Mimi. Her expression was dubious.

"So why are you mad?" Amy asked.

"You've forgotten your promise, haven't you?" Mimi said.

Ten seconds later, Amy clapped her hands, and Monako cried out, "Ahh!"

Mimi turned to the side with an expression cold as ice and spat, "You really did forget."

"No, it's like…"

"This is Maiya's fault. She just kept pushing the damn champagne at us."

"Obviously the most at fault here are the idiots who forgot their promise and glugged down alcohol."

The plan was that once most of the guests were there, on Amy and Monako's signal, Marika would show up. As she had been kicked out of the Archfiend Cram School, a lot of people hated Marika. Some magical girls even treated her as a sort of virtual enemy. Marika's appearance was supposed to cause a big melee battle to break out and give the Archfiend Cram School a shot in the arm, since they'd been so listless from the Cranberry Shock…so had been the scenario.

Amy and Monako being dead drunk and unable to give the signal was no excuse. Even Amy, who had been forced into participating in something she didn't want to, would be angry. Being the host, Marika would be mad—no, she wouldn't be mad. She would try to vent her frustration. She'd probably say, oh well, then let's have fun with just the people here. She would definitely say that. Mimi could see it happening.

Not only would their hard work end in nothing—they might even get punished. She'd sent letters of invitation to people related to the school, other famous strong fighters and famous magical girls, and even made a new category for hopeful newbies who had just started to get a reputation, then surreptitiously borrowed an unused villa and decorated it, made alcohol and food with wheat and sugar made by Marika, layering preparation on preparation—

"It's all ruined," Mimi moaned.

"Why're you being so self-important about this? Then you should've given the signal."

"I was running the costume change stall outside, I couldn't do it."

"You were only outside because you didn't want to get dragged into the brawl."

"Don't you assume that about me."

Something creaked. Mimi turned around with great trepidation. There was a crack in the pot with a Japanese fir planted in it. Marika, who had been in suspended animation, had woken up. The sound grew louder, and the cracks spread.

Breaking and crumbling sounds rang out through the hall. A hand sprouted from the side of the planter. It grew legs from below that stood as the cracks connected, and it broke into pieces, scattering earth and pottery. It was the largest of Marika's potted plants that Mimi knew of. Marika, with a Japanese fir growing out of her head, resembled the Cordyceps that she'd seen in Chinese cooking. Stretching out her back, she did circles with her arms. Each time she did, the Japanese fir swayed dangerously.

Stretching out particularly long like a cat, Marika smiled at everyone. "Was someone trying to have a fight? I kinda felt that vibe."

"…I think it might have been your imagination."

The Japanese fir shook once, twice as Marika looked around the area. "There's no one here."

"That's because…well," Mimi said vaguely.

"Lots happened," Monako added.

And hearing that, Amy said, "You explain, Mimi," passing it on.

"Please," Monako said, finishing it off.

Mimi was screaming on the inside.

Those bastards fobbed it all off on me! Moron and a garbage bin!

She swiftly did the calculations. It would be difficult to lay responsibility on a moron and a garbage bin. If this turned into "You guys take responsibility and deal with her," then Mimi would obviously get dragged in, being there as well.

Just what would make Mimi the happiest right now? It was when a magical girl was backed into a corner that her true worth was made manifest. She had to make the best choice from among her meager options.

First, Mimi cleared her throat, then put on a very apologetic look as she began. "About that. Nobody came. Despite all our preparations, it wound up a lonely Christmas."

Marika looked around the area suspiciously and pointed at the tidy rows of garbage bags. "It looks like you had a party."

"It was sort of like a consolation party, eating and drinking with the morons…Amy and Monako."

"Yeah, yeah, a consolation party, uh-huh."

"We did so much consoling."

"Ahh, is that what happened?"

"It's just what you'd expect from the Archfiend School. They're all so cautious that they'd never respond to such a dubious invitation."

Mimi nodded many times with a look of sincere disappointment. Amy and Monako emulated her, but extremely casually, making Mimi's heart race.

Marika folded her arms. "I guess this means we underestimated how cautious they would be. But they're party-lovers, though."

"It might just be the times… Also, you know, the Archfiend could have warned them to be careful."

Arms still folded, Marika looked at the ground at her feet. Mimi was completely on edge, but she didn't let it show. After facing each other like that for a while, suddenly Marika lifted her head, swinging up the Japanese fir and making it drop needles everywhere.

"So then let's call this learning our lesson for next time and end it for the night. Next time…we'll have a New Year's party!"

Marika bellowed with laughter in front of them, and Amy and Monako cheered with sincere joy. Mimi stood there frozen in shock. The Christmas Party from Hell was not over yet.

The Young Princess Nozomi Himeno

This story takes place a while before the events of *Magical Girl Raising Project limited.*

Debut

Monthly Magical Girl Raising Project on *This Manga is Amazing! WEB*

The Young Princess Nozomi Himeno

◇ Nozomi Himeno

The moment she saw the ad, she clenched a fist. Exhausted as Nozomi Himeno was from her ongoing worries, she had almost overlooked the page about the seminar, but it had a firm grasp on her heart now. Gripping the edges of the free bulletin the ad was printed in, she reread the text.

Communication skills and relationships. A heart that would never buckle, no matter what people said of you. A strong spirit.

For people insecure about their appearance: welcome.

Up until there, she could call it common stuff. But following that, in the section with personal experiences of people who had taken the seminar, they included a report from “Miss A, who had been worried about how old she looked compared to her real age.” Because she looked very young, she had struggled with building relationships and stuck out at work. But then, it said, she’d taken this seminar and gotten some communication skills, and it had solved everything. The message from the staff that “There are lots of people like Miss A” got Nozomi excited, making her cry out loud without even realizing it.

Her mother, making coffee in the kitchen, grew suspicious. “Did something happen?” she asked.

“It’s nothing,” Nozomi responded carelessly, silently apologizing to her mother: *I know I got these looks from you, but I don’t really enjoy looking so young… I’m sorry, Mom.*

Nozomi Himeno had gone through preschool, elementary school, middle school, and high school with no particular problems.

She hadn’t considered herself blessed in the slightest—or rather, she’d never even noticed it. She’d taken it all for granted, assuming that this was how life should be. She was lucky enough that the ground had never crumbled or broken underneath her, but she assumed things were just like this and continued to frolic around atop thin ice.

Perhaps because her father was so quiet and taciturn, her mother was very minutely attentive. The two of them were very different, but neither were the type to hurt someone with words. Having had parents like this since her birth, Nozomi was completely unaware that she was blessed in having such a family.

It wasn't only her parents—she was also blessed in her friends. She had a lot of friends, both male and female, who would dote on her, who were willing to risk their lives to keep her from danger and treat her like the princess—*hime*—in her name. And since they were all at the same elementary, middle, and high schools, she'd spent twelve years surrounded by these classmates. Thinking about it now, she realized how her school environment had been as gentle as being wrapped up in soft cotton. She had laughed every day.

Some of the teachers at school had been strict or mean, but they had been kind enough on her to say things like, "If it seems like you can't, Himeno, you don't have to push yourself," or "You're the one person who shouldn't be too reckless."

She hadn't thought they were being soft on her at the time, but thinking about it now that she was in college, it was fair to say she had been pretty spoiled. In a sense, she had been the school mascot, acknowledged by everyone around as "just what she was." No one had ever questioned it—they simply said, "Nozomi is so tiny and cute," and that was the end of it.

She'd been very happy through elementary, middle, and high school. After high school graduation, she had gone on to a local university, and there, for the first time, the inconveniences had begun. They made her realize exactly how blessed she had been.

People came from all over for college. Even if it was a local school, not a lot of her friends had come from her high school. In other words, those for whom the strange sight of Nozomi Himeno was a daily feature were in the minority. When she passed by, people would giggle and point at her in the cafeteria, and when it got to the point of people secretly whispering rumors about her, Nozomi was forced to realize that her looks drew attention, in the negative sense.

If anyone looked closely, they could tell she was different from an elementary schooler. She was more mature around the eyes, and the redness in her cheeks was fainter. But the world wasn't going to observe her that closely. It was just *she seems funny, so then let's laugh at her,* and that was it. Some were considerate enough to think that maybe that would hurt her or was improper, but the inconsiderate people stood out more. These people hurt Nozomi, then thought nothing of the fact that they'd done it.

And so Nozomi was exposed to the harshness of the world. But she did have friends who'd come to this university from the same high school. They would comfort her, telling her to not get hung up on it, and Nozomi would stop them when they tried to directly argue with people who laughed at her, and stop them when they were about to resort to more violent methods, and as this kept happening, she met the friends of her friends, and her group broadened, and at some point, Nozomi stopped getting giggled at. She figured this was partly because they'd simply gotten used to her or gotten sick of her.

In the end, the fuss that couldn't even really be called a fuss concluded without becoming a disaster, but the sequence of events affected Nozomi enough that remembering it made her sigh. Though it had not been all bad, and there had been some good, though little. It had given her an opportunity to consider.

She had friends at college. But what would happen when she got a job? She was almost a junior, when efforts to get employed would begin in earnest. This was not the distant future or far down the road.

If Nozomi left her parents' home and moved out of the prefecture, would there be anyone there who would help her? She wouldn't have her mother, father, friends, or even any acquaintances. She would be all alone. Just thinking about it felt bleak.

When she was in the bath, when she was on her way to school, and right before going to bed—she would find every spare minute she could to think about what she should do to get along in the world. She kept thinking through her first year, then her second year, and when she was about ready to give up, she remembered that there was a model case very close to her.

Her mother. She was already in her forties, but 95 percent of people meeting her for the first time thought she was Nozomi's older sister. Of course, she must have suffered the same sorts of things as Nozomi, but she never let people sense that at all, always bright and cheery. She had a lot of friends, and her relationships with neighbors were deep and close. In other words, that had to mean she had great communication skills. She never fretted over Nozomi's father, who would only ever answer "Yeah," "uh-huh," or "mm" when they talked to him. That was because of her strong spirit.

Unfortunately, while her mother's looks were genetic, it seemed her personality was not. But communication skills and strength of spirit were things that you could acquire as an adult—so it had been said on the seminar outline. If she went to the seminar, then she could change. She could avoid worrying about people giggling at her or whispering things—in fact, she could even make friends with them. First and foremost came the seminar.

Writing down the date and the location it would be held, Nozomi returned to her daily life with both hope and unease in her heart.

Time passed, and it was the day of the seminar. It had said to please come in comfortable clothing possible to exercise in. Nozomi worried if something more formal would be better, but since the ad had said casual, she'd figured *oh well*, and got herself ready to be active in cotton pants and T-shirt.

She passed two stations in the train, then she walked the country road for about five minutes, checking the map on her phone on the way.

It'll be fine, it'll be fine. I'm sure it'll go well. I'm sure, absolutely, I think…

With major hopes and slight anxiety making her heart pound as she walked, she arrived at her destination. Drawing in one big breath, she passed through the elementary school gates and stepped onto the sports field.

Then she staggered, automatically grabbing the monkey bars to support herself. Was it because of her expectations? The moment she entered the sports field, her heart stirred. It was hot—she felt as if *something* that she couldn't put into words had pierced her heart.

Maybe in coming here, she'd finally understood how much hope she'd placed on this seminar. Releasing the monkey bars, she wiped off the red rust stuck to her palms and started walking to the gym. With each step forward she took, her sense of exultation grew, building up until she felt like she'd get heartburn.

She restrained her excitement, and with a controlled smile on her face, she took a peek through the entrance. Nozomi batted her eyes a few times and looked around repeatedly.

Th-this is…

The formal impression she'd gotten from the word "seminar" was shattered in one glance. For starters, it was loud. Noisy. Loud laughter echoed here and there, followed by the sound of running, the sound of a ball bouncing on the floor, and a deep voice yelling not to do anything dangerous. Small figures were playing around, filling the whole gymnasium. Some were playing tag on the stage, some were playing basketball, some were playing dodgeball, some were spreading out a meeting table in one corner to have a card game, and more were getting into competitive or co-op play in a handheld video game.

Nozomi couldn't figure out how the "seminar" she'd envisioned was related to what she was seeing now. It just looked like kids were playing. Had she perhaps gotten the location wrong? She pulled out her phone to check it one more time—

"Hello," came a voice from above.

That got her all flustered. Taking as much care as she could to keep her voice from squeaking or from showing her panic, she responded with a greeting of "Hello."

The man in his sixties with a charming smile nodded a few times. "Is this your first time here?"

"Ahh, yes…it is."

"There's nothing to be nervous about. If you join in and come have fun with everyone, you can make friends right away. We even have kids of relatives and friends of friends coming. We get such a big crowd, we wind up in the red every time. Though we do have some volunteer help."

It didn't seem as tough as he was describing—in fact, he was smiling happily as he gave Nozomi a little push in the back. Nozomi staggered forward. The high-pitched clamoring sounded even louder, enveloping her. It made her want to cover her ears. But she didn't try to touch them, watching the small figures run around. They were all so focused. They didn't even try to look at Nozomi. Neither did they point at her and giggle, or whisper to each other.

For some reason, she started feeling excited. It was just like when she'd walked onto the sports field. She started to not care at all whether or not this was really the right place. She felt so good, she could even laugh off how petty she had been with her little worries over silly things.

An adorable girl who looked like she had stepped out of an art nouveau portrait was running around on the inside of a dodgeball ring. The other kids were calling out to her, “Watch out, Nokko!” or “Dodge it, Nokko!” The ones holding the balls and the ones running were all smiling. It was as if all the fun they were having was being passed onto Nozomi as well. It was fun just watching—and not only that, the desire to join in was welling up from the depths of her heart and wouldn’t stop. A strong-looking girl who appeared to be middle school–age was acting as the ref, calling out “Nice defense,” and “Close, a little farther.” Nozomi experienced the illusion that her voice was directed at her.

I see. So that’s what this was.

Clothes that were easy to move around in. People who were insecure about the age they looked. Everyone here all looked like elementary schoolers, but they were not elementary school kids. Everyone said Nozomi looked like a little kid, but she wasn’t, either, so there was nothing strange about this. Looking closely, there were even boys with long sideburns that did kind of look like facial hair, and there were girls who had the clear indents of smile lines. They were all men and women of a decent age who worried about how they looked like children, or had worried about it, and this seminar had helped them get over it, and now they were being like kids again and playing with others with those same worries…

But as Nozomi thought about this, the urge to have fun and play continued to spread in her heart, not only expanding but deepening and intensifying, and she stopped caring about thinking anymore. Tossing her bag into a corner of the gymnasium, she leaped into the group of adults who looked entirely like children.

“Pass, pass!”

“Hey, over here, over here!”

She had been on the basketball team until middle school. Mainly because of her height, she’d never made it into the starting lineup, but because of that, she’d practiced plenty on drills and passing. She was proud that she’d been the best in her club in that area. And that day, she was no smaller than the rest of them. Showered with words of praise like “wow,” “so fast,” and “cool,” it struck her that she might not have been complimented this much in sports since elementary school. It made it even more fun.

"Draw! Main step!"

"Place it facedown on your main card and show your hand!"

The card game was *Magical Battlers*. It had been very popular when Nozomi was in elementary school—literally everyone had been playing it, to the point that even Nozomi, who had no particular interest in card games, had joined in a tournament. She started wondering if it had maintained popularity ever since, and then remembered that oh yeah, even if they looked like kids, they were not. Realizing that they were from the same generation brought a sense of affinity. She only vaguely remembered the rules, but she borrowed a deck, and through playing she gradually remembered, doing imitations of the characters she'd loved at the time as she slammed her cards on the table and made everyone watching burst into laughter. When Nozomi was in elementary school, both the teachers' pets and the jocks had all had an imitation or two in their pockets, as a trademark routine. You'd make sure to practice it, then fire it off when you had the chance. She'd never thought this would be useful at her age. You never know what will be lucky in life. The boy who said, "That's the rival character from the first generation, huh. I saw the reruns," must have missed it when it first aired.

"Pass the ball! Don't try to score alone!"

"Dodge it, Nokko!"

In the dodgeball game, unfortunately, Nozomi wasn't able to show off like she had in the previous two games. It was no fault of her own—"Nokko" was just too amazing. It was like she wasn't human—even monkeys weren't like that, the way she dodged the oncoming balls with such incredible gymnastics, relentlessly sending opponent team members to the outer ring with fastballs that the eye couldn't catch. She'd be an athlete in the future—no, forget the future, she had to actually be over twenty years old, so she might be an athlete right now. Maybe she even made use of her beauty as an action actress, or a ballerina. Back in elementary school, she'd dreamed of being a ballerina because of a classical ballet manga that had been running at the time. Nozomi called out in her heart—*let's meet again after your debut, Nokko,* then left the dodgeball area. She was too shy to actually call out to her, so she didn't.

"Kabaddi, kabaddi, kabaddi!"

"You're it!"

They weren’t playing regular tag, but a variation where being caught depended on how high up you were. The rules were simple, but you still had to run around a lot. You couldn’t even pretend it helped to have a limited area—you had to move around endlessly in the small area or you’d be quickly caught. They’d added some elements of cops and robbers to it, so once you were caught, you wouldn’t be freed until you were saved by your teammates. And that was boring. She just wanted to run. She didn’t know why, but the desire to run, the desire to have fun filled her heart to bursting, and she wound up feeling like she was ready to pop at any moment. So Nozomi ran. She fled. She leaped. She climbed. She wasn’t going to let herself get caught, and even if she was, that would be once she was the last one left, she figured as she ran all around. Women were running around with their skirts fluttering as if they didn’t care if you saw what was underneath, but they should really have been acting a little more cautious.

“All right, we’ve got juice!”

The adults who looked like nothing other than children burst into cheers. The man who had pushed Nozomi’s back—was he also suffering from a difference in his apparent age? So then he might actually be in his twenties or thirties—pushed a trolley with a big plastic box on it. Floating inside it was water, big chunks of ice, and most of all—canned juice that drew the eyes of those who looked.

The desire to drink, to moisten her throat, to feel refreshed rose up from within her chest and wouldn’t go away. Everyone dashed out at once to grab drinks, so some even fell and burst into tears. Nozomi helped up the people who fell and got those who cried to stop their tears, and all the while, the drinks vanished in the order of popularity. Pragmatically concluding that, well, they weren’t going to have any canned red bean soup, so she wouldn’t mind getting something that wasn’t quite what she wanted, she pulled her towel out of her tote bag and wiped off her sweat, then headed leisurely to the plastic box once there was nobody crowding around it anymore. It was just a few cans of juice left, and thinking something carbonated would be nice if possible, she scanned the box, but there was nothing of the sort. Figuring she’d give up on carbonation, she stuck a finger to her chin and twisted around. That was when a can of beer caught her eye, hidden below some ice. Looking over, the man who had brought the trolley, as well as a few of the other people who looked like adults she could see, were enjoying cans of beer, too. Nozomi's throat was aching for it. It wasn't like she loved alcohol all that much, but a beer after some exercise was something else. She loved barley tea, but she also loved barley-made booze. It would surely be delicious and feel good to gulp down a refreshing quarter of a can. And happily, it also had plenty of the carbonation that Nozomi was looking for.

She moved feverishly and without a thought, picking up the beer—not some dinky brand but a well-known domestic beer that was often advertised on TV. She got her nails under the tab and cracked it open, bringing her lips close to the liquid as it started overflowing. She gulped it down in one go, and someone shrieked.

◇ Nokko

The older girl who had been playing with them until just a few minutes ago was sitting on her knees, hunched over. The adults surrounding her looked troubled and sort of angry, and then on top of that, the children were all chattering loudly as they watched from a distance. The adults were passing around a driver's license and looking at it as they whispered back and forth. They checked the driver's license over and over, nodding with expressions like maybe this made sense to them and maybe it didn't, before someone squatted down and held out the license to the lady. The lady accepted it in both hands like she was very sorry.

"Well, it seems real, so the alcohol should be fine."

"Okay."

"It's our fault for letting you through without really checking, and also our fault for leaving the beer within reach."

"Okay."

"But look, can we really be expected to believe you thought this was a seminar?"

"Yeah…sorry."

"Just now I tried calling the city hall, and they said the place where they're doing that seminar, whatever it was called, is Tanonaka City Municipal Gymnasium. This is the Tanonaka Elementary School Gymnasium."

"Ahh, yes, I made a mistake."

"Even if you did make a mistake, you could tell it's not right when you came in. This clearly doesn't look like we're having a seminar. It can't look like anything other than a tri-city community fun day."

"It's like, um…I felt excited in a way I can't really explain…like there was something tugging at my heart…like I stopped understanding things I would normally get…"

Nokko clenched the breast of her clothing. She'd rip it off if she put her actual magical-girl strength into it, so she kept her grip loose. No—she didn't have to be in magical-girl form. It was because she was transformed that things had wound up like this. She'd gotten worked up from dodgeball and gotten slack about controlling her magic, letting her excitement leak out all over and influence the people around her.

Once, an acquaintance of her father's had invited him out fishing, saying "Mountain stream fishing is fun at this time of year," and so the whole family had gone out to the country. There, they'd run into an unexpected event, and Nokko had made a selfish decision. *It's nothing but big kids,* she'd thought. *But if I turn into a magical girl and join in, they won't treat me as useless.* Her luck had run out there. She'd had fun at the event while transformed into Nokko and gotten excited, and that had stirred up the heart of an adult woman who'd accidentally gotten mixed up with them, resulting in this nonsense situation. And now the woman was being put in this completely uncomfortable spot, and it was basically Nokko's fault.

"…Do you have some kind of mental health problem?"

"I don't think so…"

Nokko wondered what she should do, but couldn't find an answer. She couldn't admit her fault openly, and she couldn't think of any way to help the adults. The college student who really looked like a kid hung her head dejectedly, and seeing that made Nokko feel so bad, she wanted to disappear. Even though Nokko was the one who should be blamed, she couldn't even find a way to help.

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry! She squeezed her eyes tight and wholeheartedly apologized, and the apology she couldn't say out loud was interrupted by the sound of something hitting the floor. When she snapped her eyes open, there was someone on the ground on the floor, facedown with a sketchbook in both hands. It was the girl in middle or high school who had been acting as the ref for dodgeball.

The adults and the chattering kids all fell silent. Not knowing what was going on, they were confused.

"I'm so sorry…!"

All the adults, the kids, the one they were angry at, and the people getting angry could do was look uncomprehending. The apologizing girl shrank, kneeling on the floor, as she just repeated her apology.

"I'm sorry… I really am…"

"What is it, Miss Satou?"

"I want to apologize… I just want to apologize."

"Oh, no, why would you apologize? We're so grateful you would help out for no pay at all."

"That's not it… I…have an ulterior motive…ahh… I'm sorry…!"

"It's actually me who should be feeling sorry."

"No…I should apologize. I feel like I went a little too far…"

"If you're going to be like that, then I just came here for the beer."

"That's better than me. I wanted to lie around at home, but my mom kicked me out, and I was forced to come here…"

"No…I'm the most sinful here…"

No matter what the adults said to her, Satou refused to lift her head, and gradually the adults also started apologizing. At some point, the kids got caught up in it, and the whole crowd broke into a competition of apologies: "Forgive me," "I'm sorry," "It's my fault," "I'm the one who ate my little brother's snack." As some kids were bursting into tears, the source of the contagion spreading the guilt to everyone—Nokko—approached from behind the college-aged girl who looked like a child and was insisting louder than anyone else.

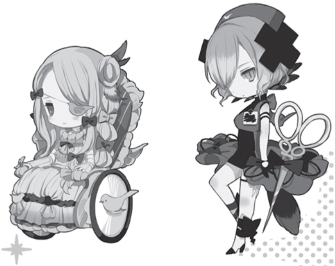
"This is your chance," Nokko whispered. "Let's run."

The girl turned around to her in surprise. Nokko nodded at her and thought hard, *We have to run,* meddling with her mind. Before long, the girl was nodding back firmly, hugging her bag to her chest and rushing out to the exit.

"Please don't get discouraged!" Nokko yelled as she watched the girl go. She didn't know how useful it would be, but she begged deep down: *Don't give in to anyone! Be strong!*

The Schoolyard Observer

This story takes place a while before the events of *Magical Girl Raising Project restart.*



Debut

Asari Endou's official Twitter account (@asariendou)

The Schoolyard Observer

Despite what you'd expect from the at-a-glance aristocratic surname of Kinunomiya, my family had been middle class since my grandfather's generation. Before then, I didn't know, but I'd heard they were farmers just barely feeding themselves, so they were probably worse than middle class. At this point, nobody knew why we'd wound up with that surname.

As was typical for a kid from a middle-class household, I'd gone to public schools for elementary and middle school. Public schools would basically accept anyone, whether you were from a rich family or a poor family.

So there had been a lot of different people there. About 30 percent of them I'd liked, while 10 percent were people I just couldn't bring myself to like. Twenty percent were smart, while 65 percent were dumb. Forty percent were good people, and 20 percent were nasty. I was a good example of one of the nasty types. I was always looking to see who was in control in a classroom. I'd sense the power balance, and either get close to them or stay away from them as I enjoyed my time at school.

And just over 40 percent of them were lacking in class. A lot of the boys in particular were vulgar, and it seemed to me there wasn't anyone actually sophisticated.

I was sure there were some who gave a sense of their good upbringing, and some such girl came off as ladylike, but when I started high school at an institution packed with real, blue-blooded rich girls, I realized that I'd had no classmates who were sophisticated in the true sense of the word.

Phrases like "oh, you flatter me," "good day," "oh my," "gentlemen," and "amusement" would come out of these girls' mouths completely unironically—they were real blue bloods.

Yes, starting in high school, I began going to a school for rich girls. Why was it that someone like me, who had only ever been middle class, was able to stage an upper-class debut? It was really no big reason. My father left his desk job to strike out on his own in this day and age and miraculously made his business succeed. So I started attending a private school that would never have let me in based on academics, wasn't in my neighborhood, and had high tuition, to boot. I just took my chance to slip into the rich girls' school I'd always secretly yearned for. That was all it was.

I was so on edge, worried that the natives might attack another who came in after the fact, but that never actually happened. The rich girls were kind, magnanimous, and carefree. They didn't like anything unsightly or indecent—so perhaps that meant they didn't even like to think about backbiting or malicious bullying, which was the embodiment of unsightliness and indecency.

My prejudiced opinion that bullies existed in every social strata was quickly proven wrong. Or so I thought at first. It seemed that wasn't true, and some students had done something like bullying in the past, but apparently, they had all—without exception—left the school. Having already gotten good at pretending to be a rich girl by the orientation at the beginning of school, I went "My, how frightful" and trembled a bit.

It wasn't an act that I was scared. It really did seem frightening to me. It seemed possible. Because I knew of someone who seemed like she definitely would do such a thing.

Back when my father first quit his day job and began trading miscellaneous imports, there was talk of a large shopping mall coming to the neighborhood that came up and then quickly vanished. Apparently, people were whispering baseless rumors that some landowning girl had pulled strings behind the scenes to ruin the launch plan. According to that rumor, she had done it because the café that served her favorite chocolate parfait might be put into a tough spot by the shopping mall. My father had many minor contracts with businesses in that commercial area, said café included, so he'd heard about that story.

Kanoe Hitokouji. In a nutshell, she was a girl who owned land, but she was not the sort of person who could be described in a nutshell.

They said that if you threw a rock in the prefecture, you would hit Hitokouji's land. Born in such a major landowning house, she was always at the top of her year in her studies and was fabulously athletic—even though she wasn't in the track club, she was faster than the class track club athletes. She was beautiful in looks and eloquent in speech, and you could practically smell the class in every single one of her gestures, even a single blink. Even among other blue bloods, she stuck out as being on a level or two above the rest…except she didn't hold it over their heads. She was a blue blood among blue bloods, just naturally pompous.

And she wasn't simply an imposing figure. Whether they were true or not, there were no few heroic-sounding rumors of her having meted out harsh punishment to some bad people. Aside from that story about the large shopping mall, they also said that a few college students who entertained themselves in nasty ways and tried to pick up Kanoe when she was on a walk through the neighborhood stopped coming to college for a few days, and then when they did return after a long break, they had settled down so much, it was like they were different people. To the blue bloods, even such fearsome tales were apparently a part of the great Kanoe's charm, and they would shriek and chatter about it like other girls of their age, but in a more refined way.

I'd always had a pleasant time at school by currying favor with the powerful. In this class—or rather, in this school—the absolute strongest was clearly Kanoe Hitokouji. So then you'd think that I should be getting close to her. But she was different from the children that I'd come in contact with before, the "strong of the classroom." She was actually strong, the type that was powerful even in the world of adults. If I were to approach her via my usual simplistic methods, I was bound to meet a sorry end. All of the rumors indicated the degree of difficulty here. Even if only a tenth of the rumors were true, this would be pretty hard.

But I also thought that if I was to try to get close to someone, then Kanoe would be it. While it was dangerous, there was much to be gained, and I would really regret it if I let this pass me by. I figured if I was going to do it, then I would be careful.

I would observe Kanoe in such a way that I would not be noticed, making sure to stay far enough away that I was safe. Only after that I should approach her. Plenty of girls would shriek and chitter when they saw Kanoe. If I mingled with them to talk about how she was so wonderful and lovely and whatnot, I could get lost in the crowd. Squeeing and chittering with other girls was not at all fun for me, but right now, fun was of second- or third-place importance.

This was how I watched and observed Kanoe Hitokouji after entering school. I spent quite a while on observation—the secondary effect of which was that I noticed that her attendant, Mamori Totoyama, was a rather interesting creature.

Attendant. There was such a thing as too old-fashioned, but if you were going to describe Mamori Totoyama, then no word was more accurate than "attendant." She followed Kanoe Hitokouji around from behind and was responsible for her various daily needs and troubles. No matter how many times seat assignments changed with the seasons, the two of them were always side by side—in other words, it was easy to tell that even our homeroom teacher was showing deference here.

Kanoe treated Mamori like a pet she was proud of. That was a vulgar simile, if I did say so myself. But it really did strike me like that.

Just as there were girls who would shriek and chitter about how Kanoe and Mamori made a good set, it looked to me like each of them enhanced the other. The "soft" Kanoe, with her fluffy curls and fine white skin, and the "hard" Mamori, with her functionally and evenly cut black hair and overbearing height, were completely mismatched, while at the same time paired as if compensating for the parts of the other. I could get why Kanoe would feel proud.

In contrast with Kanoe's seeming pride, apparently Mamori was not all that loyal, and she would be surprisingly blunt. More than once or twice, in a quiet voice that nobody could hear—observing Kanoe as I did, I was often listening—she would make sarcastic and nasty remarks about Kanoe.

"It's a mean thing to say? You, of all people, are saying that, miss?"

"I'm surprised you even knew the word 'kindness,' miss."

"What the heck? That's just gross. Oh no—I just said that out loud."

It was generally something like that. She had to have done it more than ten or twenty times, if you counted the times I hadn't heard.

The first time I heard it, I was shocked. I'd even wondered if I'd misheard. I was just a classmate, and Kanoe was a fearsome figure even for me—so having a direct relationship of master and servant, it had to be even worse for her. I got a peek at her face, wondering if she was scared. But Mamori had her usual cool look and didn't seem ashamed, and Kanoe was also smiling pleasantly.

Mamori was average in sports and academics; she didn't particularly excel in anything. The only thing she beat Kanoe on was height. She never smiled or looked happy. At the very least, I never saw it. She always looked bored.

Maybe Kanoe preferred a more low-key type of obsequiousness. Or maybe this role worked precisely because Mamori was the one filling it. The odds between the two possibilities were four to six. They weren't great either way.

After observing her for some time, I came to a tentative conclusion. Mamori Totoyama was a deeply interesting angle from which to approach Kanoe.

Compared to fans of Kanoe, or fans of the Kanoe/Mamori pairing, fans of Mamori on her own were in the vast minority. But her unaffected—or put a meaner way—unsociable attitude would make them nod with enthusiasm, as if to say, "That's just what I prefer." But it seemed they wouldn't go so far as to push Kanoe to the side, committing to the view that "So long as she's happy, that's for the best."

It was a very one-sided way of looking at things. To Kanoe, Mamori was not just a loyal servant. She was someone important, and might well have been the key to getting close to Kanoe Hitokouji.

Observing her with the calmest eye possible might lead to new discoveries. No—maybe I should try initiating contact, instead. It would be less dangerous than with Kanoe, and it would be worth trying. It would be a preparatory step for living an even better life at school. I couldn't scrimp on time and effort now.

Bearing in mind the fact that Kanoe Hitokouji was a dangerous person, I stayed far enough away not to be noticed and observed. Not just with Kanoe—with Mamori as well. In fact, it was best to weigh it sixty-forty toward Mamori. If she offered me an opening, then I'd attempt some form of communication.

This was a good general course of action. *All right, let's keep at it.*

And so I tucked that determination in my heart, though I could speak to no one about it—of course I could speak to no one about it—and on the afternoon of that very day, in the five-minute interval between fifth and sixth period, an incident occurred.

The fine young ladies who attended this school did not all go to the bathroom together. Pretending to be a fine young lady myself, I also went alone. I strolled to the bathroom and went into one of the open stalls, and right when I was about to close the door, a shadow fell over me.

Mamori Totoyama was facing me with her usual cool expression. It should go without saying that even when girls entered the bathroom together, they didn't enter the same stall together. I should have been able to protest, or scream, or something, but I couldn't move, frozen in place. The only thing moving inside me was my heart, which was attempting to pump blood around my whole body twice as fast as normal. I'd been thinking that I'd try an approach if I had the chance, but I'd never expected her to come to me.

Mamori closed the stall door behind her and leaned right close to me. I reflexively tried to back up, but I was prevented by the toilet, my legs couldn't move, and I lost my balance. I started an unsightly fall, but Mamori came even closer, wrapping an arm around my waist to catch me.

"Sorry for being so sudden, in a place like this," she said.

Her breath was on my ear. I could feel her palm through my uniform. Her fingers were long. The information about Mamori Totoyama I had gained through my observation was now flowing into me—with physical sensations, too, this time.

"It would be dangerous to speak where others could be watching…so I had no choice."

Her restrained voice, practically a whisper, felt more intimate than usual. That voice that was so prickly toward Kanoe Hitokouji had an intimacy in it! And it was toward me. My heart rate soared. My body was heating up at an even faster rate.

"Kinunomiya, you've been watching Hitokouji a lot lately, haven't you?"

Even if I had been feeling calm, I wouldn't have been able to say, *"No, if anything, I've been watching you."*

"Well—plenty of other people watch her, but your looks are a little different from the others'… The way you look at her doesn't seem very affectionate. I couldn't help but feel curious."

I could have sworn that I'd been the one watching her, but she had been watching me, too. I'd thought I was the observer, but I had been observed. Mamori Totoyama—this woman who acted like she was disinterested in everything in the world—had paid attention to me and had been watching me the whole time.

"I can understand the feeling painfully well. However, blatant hostility is truly dangerous. You can't let her see you as unpleasant, and it's even worse if she thinks of you as interesting. If there really is something you just can't stand, then please, let me."

Mamori supported me with her right hand as she squeezed my hand with her left. My head kept spinning; I couldn't think straight. With 30 percent less cognitive ability than usual, I was at a loss over something as trivial as *"I don't want her noticing my sweaty hands."* Even though there was no way she wouldn't notice.

"Well, then…pardon me, truly."

Mamori released my hand and gave me a little bow in the cramped space. Her head came down from a level higher than my own, and as it came close, a waft of a smell—most likely the pleasant scent of her shampoo—tickled my nostrils. The hand I'd just drawn away from came forward, hovering as if it would touch the hair in front of me, and I hastily stopped it.

With her head bowed, Mamori wouldn't see me being so weird. She opened the door behind her in the same way as she'd come in, slipped out like a ninja through the slightest gap to go outside, and shut it with a *thump*.

I blew out a breath like I was trying to get all the air out of my lungs. My head felt dizzy, and unable to stay on my feet, I slumped down to sit on the Western-style toilet.

I couldn't lose my cool. No time was more important to think with composure than when you were taken unawares. I pulled out my handkerchief and wiped my forehead. *Calm down, calm down,* I told myself. *I am an observer.* Though I'd flinched a little, surprised that she had also been watching me, it wasn't as if I had quit being an observer.

◇◇◇

My mind still in a haze, I somehow got through the school day, went home, and slept the night, and by then I'd finally managed to regain my cool. While swaying on the bus to school, I pondered.

Was Kanoe Hitokouji behind that incident the day before? I had the feeling she wasn't. It wasn't like I should be believing everything Mamori said, but there were a lot of things that didn't seem right, if Kanoe was involved. In other words, this hopeless tightness in my chest was 99 percent Mamori's fault.

The one to mark in the future was not Kanoe. It was Mamori. Starting that day, that sixty-forty ratio would be 100 percent devoted to Mamori. I could do as Mamori had warned me that way, too, so you could call it two birds with one stone.

I pulled out my phone and adjusted my schedule. First, I changed the title from MT to M—MT was for Mamori Totoyama, but M was just for Mamori. This was my way of showing that I wanted to be close enough with her that we would be on a first-name basis. I also changed my plans, making my observation rate that had been sixty-forty with Kanoe and Mamori into 100 percent Mamori—all Mamori, all the time.

Starting that day, I wanted to observe Mamori's activities after school, too. Rather, I had to observe her. I was an intellectual and calm observer.

Class 2-F's Boxed Lunch Competition

This story takes place shortly before the events of *Magical Girl Raising Project Black*.

Debut

Monthly Magical Girl Raising Project on *This Manga is Amazing! WEB*

Class 2-F's Boxed Lunch Competition

◇ Thunder-General Adelheid

Magical girl class 2-F had an unusual number of events. In less than one month, they'd had a night march, a book report competition, a choir group singing contest, and a field trip, and if you added in all the various recreational events on top of that, it would be in the double digits.

This was Adelheid's first time going to a real school, but even she could tell that this wasn't normal. Whether all these events were for measuring the girls' attitude, or they'd shoved all the school events into the first semester to create a sense of unity (since magical girls were very individualistic and tended to clash), or whether it was just because the management wanted to do it—it was not something for a mere student to know.

"C'mon, but it's still strange," said Adelheid.

"There was the field trip before the long weekend, too. And then Golden Week ends, and we have another field trip," Lillian agreed.

"Right after Golden Week ends, immediately being, like, tomorrow is a field trip! What is up with that? Normally, isn't a schedule a schedule because they decide it ahead of time? The hell're they suddenly sticking a field trip in there?" Mephis grumbled.

"I think…we should just…give it our best effort," said Kumi-Kumi.

The four members of Group Two in Class 2-F, the group leader Mephis Pheles at the head, with Kumi-Kumi, Classical Lillian, and Adelheid, were all squatting behind the old school building for a talk. It was about the field trip that their homeroom teacher Calkoro had announced.

"The only thing I can think of…is like…that it's that this is different…from the previous field trip," Kumi-Kumi said.

"A field trip is a field trip. What's so different about it?" Mephis demanded.

"Last time, we climbed a nearby mountain, didn't we?" Lillian pointed out. "Isn't the next one at a zoo?"

"Yeah, now that ya mention it, that is a totally different kind o' trip," said Adelheid.

"Is that different enough to call it that?" Mephis snorted. "That 'mountain' we climbed was just a tiny mountain even a preschooler could get to the top of, and it was no contest of endurance or shit. It's not much different from going to the zoo."

"Well, whatever the case…we should give it…yeah…our best effort."

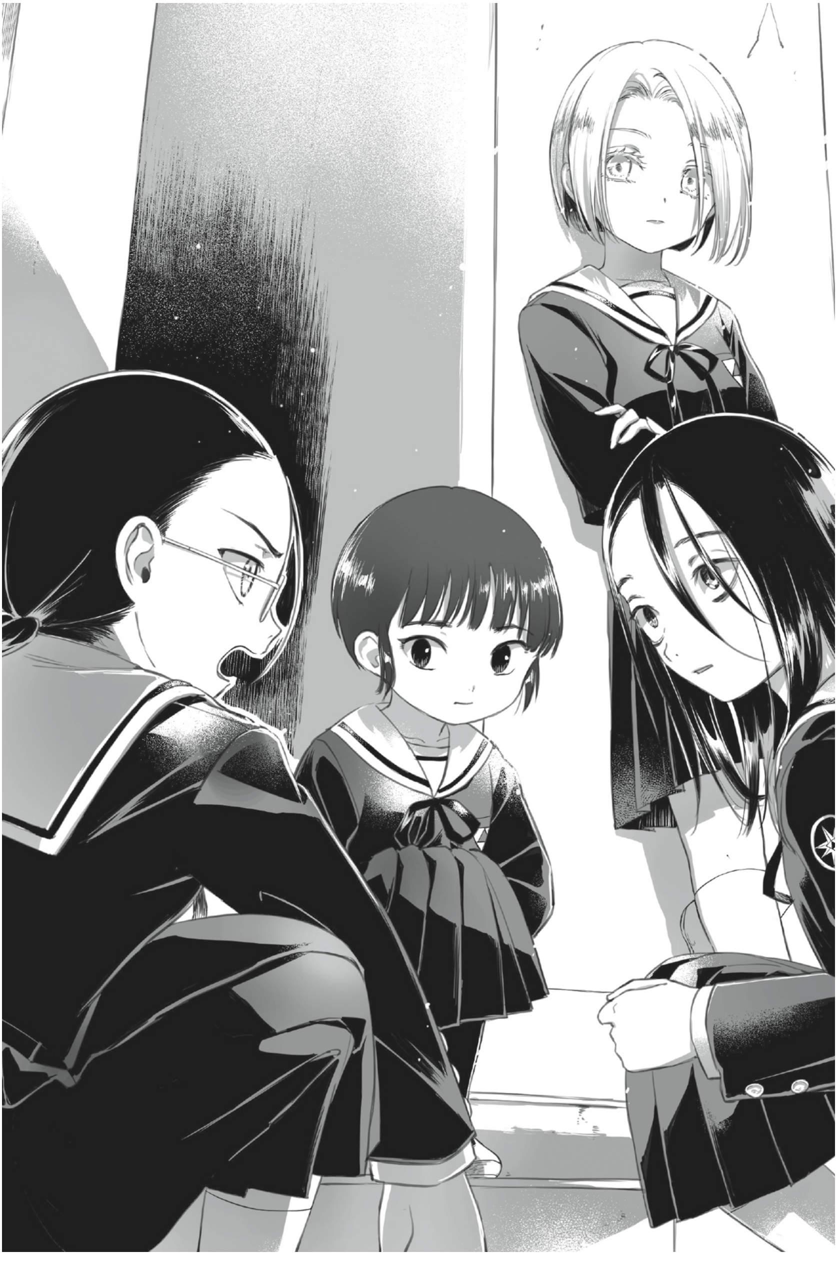
"Hey! Kumi-Kumi!" Mephis furrowed her brow, and she turned to Kumi-Kumi, pigtails swinging as she pointed at her.

While Kumi-Kumi looked a little embarrassed, she was not upset, taking Mephis's look with a "What?"

"You keep talking about giving it your best effort, but what's the 'best effort' on a field trip?"

Kumi-Kumi's gaze swam around, and Lillian tilted her head.

The ultimate goal for the magical girls of Class 2-F was success in life after graduation. Their school assessments were very important for that. Even if they couldn't figure out what this field trip was about, it was taken for granted that they would give their best effort. They had to make clear what the intention was for this trip.



Adelheid folded her arms and looked up at the sky. An idea struck her. “How ’bout showin’ off our taste?”

“What kinda taste do we show off on a field trip?” Mephis shot back.

“They said we’re allowed to use three hundred yen for our snacks. There’s a pretty big individual difference in what sort of snacks we get, for that amount… In other words, ah think that’s somewhere you can see our taste.”

“Snack choice showing off your taste is just for elementary schoolers.”

Lillian and Kumi-Kumi both nodded at the same time, as if they weren’t usually total opposites.

Adelheid had never had a chance to go to a real school. So long as she could remember, she had been with the Archfiend Cram School, and it had been the most she could do just to keep up with her seniors, all a bunch of fearless fighters. Although the School did exercises and training, they had no field trips. Of course, they also didn’t provide a snack budget.

So having three hundred yen’s worth of snacks was incredibly exciting for Adelheid, but the other three, having gone to elementary schools in the normal world, were apparently long since tired of it.

This made her feel rather alienated, but she didn’t let it show on her face, keeping her arms folded as she drew in her chin. The other three had rejected her idea, but she thought she’d been on the right track. Food was indispensable for living creatures. Some in the Archfiend Cram School would look down on it, saying that magical girls didn’t need fancy food—but sometimes assuming it was just replenishment of nutrients would get you burned.

But middle school girls tended to want to overreach themselves. So maybe “snacks” was a little childish for them. If she were to fulfill the middle school girl urge to go further, then—Adelheid clapped her hands.

“Lunch boxes,” she said.

“…Lunch boxes?”

“If we make some cool lunch boxes, everyone’s gotta give us respect fer it. Like, *not bad.*”

“Hmph.” Mephis snorted. “Snacks and lunch boxes, it’s all the same thing.”

“Naw, that ain’t true. You were freaked out that one time before, weren’t ya, Mephis?”

“Huh? When the hell was I freaked out?”

“Ya can’t tell us ya weren’t afraid of Lightning’s giant rice ball.”

Kumi-Kumi nodded heavily with a pained expression. “Ah… that.”

Lillian hung her head with a sigh. “That thing of Lightning’s, hmm.”

Seeing Princess Lightning reaching into her backpack to pull out a rice ball that was just as big, holding it in her arms as she scarfed it down, had left everyone dumbfounded. It went beyond contrasting with her abnormally beautiful looks or any issue of that dimension. The Arlie and Dory sisters had been frightened, Tetty had gasped, and even the other Group Three girls had visibly recoiled.

This was not while transformed into a magical girl. It was pre-transformation. Of course, she should have normal human digestive organs, but once she’d started, Lightning had kept up her pace as she kept eating, and before lunchtime was over, there hadn’t been even a shred of seaweed left of that giant rice ball.

Without question, Princess Lightning had been the center of attention right then. Even in their separate groups for lunch, everyone had been glancing over toward Group Three, and even the members of Group Three had seemed overwhelmed by the whole thing. For a magical girl to be mentally overwhelmed was, in other words, a loss. That moment, the magical girls of Class 2-F had all lost to Lightning.

Group Two had brought lunch boxes bought at the convenience store. Adelheid’s sandwich, Kumi-Kumi’s boxed lunch, Mephis’s fried chicken and fried rice, Lillian’s omelet rice—they’d all been ordinary. They were not at the level to compete. They’d all looked like they were paying for having looked down on lunch and thinking it didn’t matter—in other words, food was not to be taken so lightly.

Among her seniors in the Archfiend Cram School, there was one eccentric with pro-level cooking skills. Outside of class, she would hawk her wares, claiming she was polishing her skills. Even in class, she would start rattling off about the food she liked at the drop of a hat. This tended to make other students distance themselves from her, but thinking about it now, maybe the way she committed to her intentions, even if she stuck out from those around her, was how a magical girl should be.

Kumi-Kumi nodded heavily. “Lightning…had impact.”

Mephis huffed back at Kumi-Kumi indignantly. “I wasn’t freaked out, okay. Come on, just like a boxed lunch isn’t a big deal, really.”

“Oh-ho. So ya call that no big deal?” said Adelheid.

“What? It’s not a big deal. What’s even the point of freaking out about something like that?”

“In other words, you can come up with a lunch that packs even more punch, Mephis?” Adelheid gave Mephis a particularly nasty look.

Mephis started opening her mouth, closed it, groaned, and nodded hard. “Of course…I can do that!”

The nice thing about Mephis was that she was always up for a challenge.

Having gotten back at them a bit over getting her opinions about snacks and lunches rejected twice, Adelheid smiled. “Then ah’ll be lookin’ forward to the field trip tomorrow.”

“Hold on here,” said Mephis. “You guys do it, too. It’s not gonna be just me with this, okay.”

Kumi-Kumi looked at Mephis with surprise, then looked at Adelheid. Lillian gave Mephis an incredulous look, then shifted her eyes to Adelheid.

Adelheid swiftly averted her gaze from the both of them, dropping her eyes to the floor, before slowly and timidly looking up at Mephis. Perhaps because she’d gotten angry, her face was all red. “Hey, hey…hold on a second. How are we jumpin’ to this conclusion?”

“All of us are gonna make the best lunch boxes ever. Worst one gets punished, so be ready for it,” said Mephis

This talk about opposing Lightning had, at some point, turned into a competition among the group. The nice thing about Mephis was that she was always up for a challenge, but her one flaw was that she got out of control easily. And it was difficult to stop her when she was out of control—you’d only succeed one out of three times.

◇ Kumi-Kumi

To Kumi-Kumi, a meal meant store-bought food. If you were to ask her, *what's the trick to cooking?* she would answer, *to wait right up until it's almost closing time, until they put on the discount sticker.*

So there was no way someone like her would have any ideas for a boxed lunch. So she needed to rely on someone else—she got that much. But then who should she rely on? She was competing with her group, so a fellow member was out of the question. But she wasn't close enough with any other classmates to be able to ask them for help. That meant asking a senior from the Elite Guard—but Kumi-Kumi couldn't be said to be an eloquent speaker. So basically, rather than speaking with them about it directly, she should use Line or e-mail or something.

She considered relying on a senior who was an obliging type, the sort to look after others, but if she were to contact only those sorts of seniors, that might offend the people she didn't contact. This thought led her to decide that she would send a group message to them all.

One minute after sending, she got a response. Before she could check the first, there was another, and another, not stopping as they continued to swell in her message box.

Except for when there were ceremonies, the magical girls of the Elite Guard had nothing to do but training. If anything unusual happened, they would gleefully poke their noses in it. Maybe it was a poor move to have sent a group message, since she was worried about her relationships with them, but by the time Kumi-Kumi realized this, it was already a disaster.

She stood up, sending the sitting cushion she'd been using as her pillow flying. She couldn't keep her seniors waiting. While running, she replied "I'm coming now," then "Please wait a moment," then "Thank you very much," then "Please let me treat you later."

Notepad in hand, she ran around from her seniors' houses to the Elite Guard's housing, and by the time she was done going around to all of them, the sun had set and she'd pushed a magical girl's legs and endurance as far as they would go. Now hardly remembering anything she'd noted down and figuring she should read it over later, she fell into bed.

After undoing her transformation and napping a bit, she lay around a bit in bed in an attempt to consolidate all the information, and noticing her magical phone vibrating, she jumped up.

"Hey, nice to meet you."

It was a magical girl. Not one Kumi-Kumi recognized, though. This girl had floor-length ombre hair, wore pajamas, and was holding a large pillow. She had a big, happy smile on her face.

Kumi-Kumi looked around. She was somewhere strange. It was like a kitchen, but the floor and tables were made of fluffy and white material, like clouds. They had everything anyone would need: some big tables, a gas stove and sink, cutting boards, a fridge, and a microwave—though it was all fluffy. With this, she wasn't lacking in anything for making a boxed lunch.

"Um…yes, a boxed lunch."

"I know, I know. You're making a boxed lunch, right? Nemurin is here to save random magical girls in trouble, and we won't let you down… Right, today I summoned some teachers."

With a verbal fanfare of "ta-daaa!" the magical girl in pajamas pointed both her hands to the figures behind her. There were three magical girls.

The first one was in Western style, with a ten gallon hat and boots with spurs, and a costume as skimpy as a swimsuit on top. Unyielding in the face of that exposure was her large, jiggling chest.

The pajama magical girl gestured with her palm to the Western magical girl's chest area—it was still jiggling. "First, the beautiful Calamity Mary."

"I'm good at cooking. I was a housewife for a long time. Though my husband and daughter ran off on me." She giggled after that self-deprecating comment.

Unsure if openly laughing was rude, Kumi-Kumi gave a little sycophantic titter.

"And the Ideal Sister Nana."

"When it comes to eating, you can leave it to me."

The magical girl in a nun uniform probably weighed over three digits, in kilograms. When one looked at her figure, her statement seemed like self-deprecation, but Kumi-Kumi gave a little sycophantic titter.

"And at last, the Ideal Weiss Winterprison!"

"Among knights of the Kingdom, newbies get cooking duty." The magical girl in a long coat gave a breezy smile.

Kumi-Kumi didn't know anything about kingdoms or knights, but at the very least there seemed to be no self-deprecation in her statement, so she gave an honest smile back.

"Umm…so…uhh…"

"You came here to make a boxed lunch, right? You can't forget that. And that's why…um…uhh…that's why we came, but…"

The pajama magical girl folded her arms and groaned. It seemed the words weren't coming out. The Western magical girl standing to her side—Calamity Mary—crouched down, bringing her lips close to the pajama magical girl's ear to whisper, "You're Nemurin, right? The cute magical girl who protects the peace of dreams."

"Yep, yep. Nemurin's come to save you. You need a boxed lunch, right?"

"A boxed lunch…ahh, yeah, I do."

The pajama magical girl—Nemurin—nodded with a look of satisfaction, arms still folded. "It's okay. Nemurin's trick for winning cook-offs is perfect. Listen, if we're talking cooking manga, Nemurin's read fifty…no, a hundred…um, how many titles did I read, again? It was a while ago, so it's kinda fuzzy."

"If you count the one-shots and short serials, it should be over a hundred."

"Thanks for the save, Mary. So yeah, Nemurin's read over a hundred titles. Usually the competitor who comes in after wins, but it's not like the first person to go never wins, so watch out for that."

"So the combination of manga knowledge and practical cooking techniques will make it perfect, huh?"

"Just imagining the food that we'll make is making me hungry," said Ideal Nana.

"Oh no. Wouldn't it be best to fuel ourselves first, Nana?" said Ideal Winterprison.

"No, no, let's leave eating for later," said Nemurin. "Cooking it comes first. You agree, don't you, Kumi-Kumi?"

"Ahh…um…"

"Cooking is love. That's our first basic presupposition—but not enough to win. You need ingredients."

"We're in a dream, so we can arrange for anything…or so Nemurin would like to say, but unfortunately, Nemurin's power has declined. It's so bad I even forget my own name sometimes. So I can't get you anything."

Nemurin's shoulders slumped weakly, and Mary supported her. Nana and Winterprison gave her concerned looks from either side.

"But!" There was strength in Nemurin's eyes. The cloud-like accessories that decorated her hair got similar expressions, all opening their mouths wide. “If Nemurin can’t make it herself, then she should just go borrow some! And so, beautiful Mary, please present everything we prepared!”

Mary squatted down and pulled out things from under the big table one after another to place them on top.

“I’ve gathered a chicken egg that a goose that lays golden eggs laid for some reason, soy sauce that with just one drop can give you the flavor of a fancy traditional restaurant right at home, salt produced near the former site of Sodom and Gomorrah, a ground beef and pork mixture made from a demonic fusion technique, rice from seed that was sprinkled over an old person’s grave, a lunch box that will go unscathed even if it gets hit by a nuke, a water bottle that was called the Holy Grail, and various other items with stories behind them.”

“Huh? What is this?” Kumi-Kumi stuttered.

“No need to worry. No matter how fishy it all seems, they all come with certificates of authenticity.”

“Even without a certificate of authenticity, if Sister Nana says so, then you can place full trust in it,” said Ideal Winterprison.

“Uhh…”

“All right, then, you get ready, too, Kumi-Kumi! Here’s Nemurin’s pajama-shaped apron!”

◇ Mephis Pheles

Only relevant personnel were allowed in the headquarters book depository. A common soldier of the Elite Guard was not important enough to be seen unconditionally as relevant personnel. She could get in by filing for permission and being escorted in, but even an optimistic estimate for getting permission would be three days, and depending on how busy the higher-ups were, it might take over a month.

The field trip was the next day. If she waited to get permission, she wouldn’t make it in time. But it was against Mephis Pheles’s principles to just obediently give in. So there was just one thing to do.

After checking that there was nobody by the entrance, she slipped in, closing the door without a sound. Everyone was aware of the lax security. Mephis wasn't the only one who was sneaking in.

She tiptoed between shelves piled with objects of unknown use. Transformed into a magical girl, then she didn't even need lighting. Passing soundlessly through the mountains of junk, she turned the knob of the door at the end. The book depository was ahead. Slowly turning the knob, she opened the door, and a voice came to her from behind.

"Is the ax you dropped a golden ax?"

She thought her heart would leap from her mouth, but fortunately, Mephis's heart remained in her chest.

She'd sensed no presence. It was as if someone had suddenly seeped out into being. Farther to her right, in front of the mountain of junk, stood a magical girl. She turned her whole body around, and when Mephis readied herself for a fight, she pointed the blades of the large axes she carried in each hand at her.

"Or is it the silver ax?"

Mephis was still confused, but her body moved on its own. She leaped to the left to get away from the magical girl with the axes, knocking over the shelf that was on the way, heedless of it as she leaped further. The faint smile on the ax magical girl's face crumpled, and with a panicked look, she caught the tipping shelf, slowly returning it to its original position so that nothing fell, then breathed a sigh.

"Th-th-that was close! Please don't jump around in such a cramped space! If we break something and I wind up having to pay for it, I have hardly any savings."

"What the fuck, who the hell're you?!" Mephis cried.

"That's a pretty awful thing to say… I mean, only relevant personnel are allowed in here."

"I am relevant personnel, goddamn. Don't you look down on the commando captain of the Elite Guard, Mephis Pheles."

The title "commando captain" did not exist in the Elite Guard. But she should be allowed to call herself that to give herself a little boost, she figured. She had, in spite of herself, been "freaked out" by this magical girl, so she had to psych herself up to face this.

As the magical girl tilted her head, the blade of her ax tilted diagonally. "Huh? That's strange. It should be forbidden even for the Elite Guard, though."

"Who the hell are you, though? You're not some thief who came in to steal shit, are you?"

"P-please don't say that, I'm nothing so dangerous as a thief… Oh, I give up."

She scratched at her head, parting her golden hair, and when dust fell on her white toga, she patted it off as she brought her hand down. When she leaned her axes against the wall, the wall made a nasty creaking noise, so she panicked and picked them up, gathering the both of them to sandwich under her right armpit.

Mephis squinted at the magical girl. She had an abnormal presence. It even felt like an overwhelming power was overflowing from within her. But despite that, Mephis hadn't noticed she was there. She had made herself completely undetectable, lurking there. Mephis could say for certain that if they fought, this ax lady would be stronger. But the way she moved was weirdly ordinary and human, and she acted and spoke so timidly, she seemed indifferent to strength.

Bringing her right hand to her mouth, the magical girl whispered, "Umm, please don't tell anyone else? Some confiscated items that were entrusted to me for a bit were in storage here. And for some reason, they're gone, and it seems quite likely they've been sold illicitly. Do you know of a soy sauce that can give you the flavor of a fancy traditional restaurant with just one drop, or a goose that lays golden eggs?"

"I don't."

"If you don't, then that's fine. But so I was told to keep watch, to keep any more things from disappearing. I can ask you to leave, I hope? Right? Please do, it's really awful to have them get mad at me for being incompetent at my job."

"I get your situation. But look, I want to go to the book depository over there. I don't have any business in the warehouse, so I'd like to get past."

"Huh…? But I can't… The warehouse is on the way to the book depository, though."

She was stubborn. But then if Mephis were to try to push her way through with force, there was a 99 percent chance she'd get beat, and even on that 1 percent chance she won, she'd just make the problem needlessly bigger. So then there was only one way to go—she had to win her over.

Mephis lowered her voice a notch and deliberately put in a sweet tone that she would normally never use. "Don't be so inflexible, c'mon. You're the watch for the warehouse, right? The book depository is something else."

"Oh, but…hmm."

There was a reason that Mephis, who hardly read any books besides manga, was visiting the book depository. Even if she were found going into a storage space where nobody was allowed as a general rule, with her magic, she could cover for herself. Even the magical girl in front of her, the mysterious person with the axes who she had no idea who she was, was groaning with an awkward look on her face. It was a matter of time before she gave in.

"Hey, pleeease? This isn't just about me, okay? This is also for my buddies."

"Ohhh. Your friends?" The magical girl clattered her axes and refolded her arms, drawing back her chin with a serious look on her face. "Just what sort of situation do you have going on?"

"I have to make a boxed lunch. And a really great one at that. So then I want a recipe, right? There might be that sort of thing in the book depository, right? So I wanna go to the book depository."

"I see. If that's what it is, then there's no problem."

In the darkness, the magical girl's eyes flashed sharply. In a single movement, she re-hefted the axes she'd had under her arm. Before Mephis could even be surprised, the blade was in front of Mephis's eyes. Since they'd been going down the route of resolving things with discussion, she'd dropped her fighting stance. But it was too late to grit her teeth over her own lack of wisdom. She didn't have the time to ready herself, either. She literally had a blade at her throat.

But even with things at this stage, giving up was not Mephis's way. If she was going to turn things around from here, then rather than the physical, she would use the mental—in other words, words. But before Mephis could open her mouth, the enemy spoke. The eerie, faint smile had returned to her expression.

"I know how to make a boxed lunch. I'll teach you some cooking techniques for people who live alone."

◇ Classical Lillian

Shutting herself in her room to search the Internet suited Lillian. Just imagining asking her seniors for help or sneaking into book repositories made her depressed. She would finish this alone, and nobody would get to complain. Nothing could be better.

Of course, she didn't intend to do a lazy job. If she were to bring something from some random recipe search service and call it a day, she would almost certainly get last place, and Mephis would yell at her. Mephis was, despite it all, a nice person, so her punishment shouldn't be anything too bad. But she didn't want anyone getting mad at her.

Even if there was nothing to be gained, she should still work as hard as she could. It would be difficult even for Mephis, who was always up for a fight, to yell at someone who had worked as hard as they could.

Lillian was not going to do her best because she wanted to win, she was going to do her best because she didn't want to get yelled at. But no matter what her motive was, it was still her best. She privately thought that was fine.

First, she used the Elite Guard pass to use the Magical Kingdom's exclusive search engine, using some terms that seemed right. She added in whatever words struck her: *boxed lunch, how to make, magical girl, delicious*. Via trial and error, she aimed deeper, ever deeper, beyond the depths, as if diving into a bottomless sea.

She was at a page about a magic that made delicious meals and about to click on the records of a certain incident when they demanded a password. Apparently, browsing was forbidden unless you were authorized personnel. Lillian folded her arms awhile and glared at the screen, then tried inputting the four-digit number said to be most often used as a password in the Magical Kingdom—they said it had been used by the First Mage.

An icon of a girl with glasses in a white coat changed to a smile. It seemed the password had worked. Thankful for the poor Internet literacy of the Magical Kingdom, Lillian moved onward.

The title read "boxed lunch"—it was a video. Figuring it had to be a recording of how to make a boxed lunch, she tried clicking it. But for some reason, what played was baseball practice.

A metal bat got the ball right in the center and sent it flying. The coach complained that "With you here, we're gonna run outta balls," and the teammates laughed. A boy with a physique like an adult's or even bigger, but with a still-boyish face, was laughing along with them.

After practice, the boy ran to a nearby park, where a cute girl handed him a homemade boxed lunch. Then when he opened the lid, the video ended. Just what was this? She didn't get it.

Lillian tried checking the other boxed lunch videos, too. It seemed like the girl making the boxed lunches had a crush on the baseball boy. The baseball boy was talented, with a guaranteed future as a pro. He had a lot of fans, so to stand out among them, she made lunches for him.

The video continued. It was revealed in succession that the girl was a magical girl, and that the boxed lunches were made with magic, making Lillian furrow her brow, smile, groan, and smile again, and then before she knew it, she was watching with sweat clenched in her fists over where this girl's crush would go.

The final video ended with the girl kissing the boy's cheek. There was nothing after that. This was way too half-baked to be an ending. Had it been canceled?

Lillian shook her head, and her hair followed a beat later. The clock on the desk said 3:50. After glancing at it, she went back and stared again. She had started searching in the evening and spent all that time without getting anything out of it, and then before she knew it, it was early morning of the day of the field trip—this was very bad. She wouldn't even leave traces of having worked her very best. She was about to brush back her hair with her hands, wondering what to do, when her hand touched her cheek, and stopped there.

Her cheek was wet. She'd been crying and hadn't known it.

She gritted her teeth at how petty she was for only ever worrying about people getting mad at her. *That's not how it should be,* she scolded herself, then stood up. She would still make it in time. She had enough time to make a lunch. Even just half, one-third of what that girl had done would be enough—if she could put in her love for the person eating it, then surely it would be a wonderful lunch.

◇ Thunder-General Adelheid

On the bus, everyone sang magical girl medleys in karaoke, and aside from Princess Lightning, who was nodding off, they had a great time. After they got off, they laughed at the baby monkeys playing with each other, heckled the languid hyenas, and were soothed by the capybaras diving underwater, and when they looked at the clock, wondering what was next, it was just about noon. Time flew when you were having fun. That went all the more so when you weren't in magical-girl form.

Everyone returned to the bus for the moment, and then with backpacks in hand, headed to the central park square.

It being a weekday, the square was fairly empty. They spread plastic sheets on the lawn, and now it was time for their lunch break. Groups One, Two, and Three each sat in circles a yard apart and chatted as they had their lunches.

Adelheid looked to Group One first. Tetty had a very normal middle schooler–looking boxed lunch, Miss Ril's was also very normal, aside from having a larger amount, Rappy was using an expensive-looking multi-tiered lunch box, but the contents were nothing of note, and Arlie and Dory were eating bars.

As predicted, Group One was no problem. They hadn't put anything in particular into their lunches.

Figuring the problem would be these guys, Adelheid moved just her eyes to Group Three. Diko and Ranyi had convenience store bread, Pshuke had a bunch of bananas, and Lightning—as before—had a giant rice ball.

But that wasn't the end of it. Ranyi cried out in startlement and pointed at Sally's lunch box. The others in the group stood around Sally and looked down at the boxed lunch. Drawn there using seaweed, minced meat, and pink fish floss were some characters—Cutie Pearl and Cutie Onyx, posing.

"Whoa…a character lunch!" said Pshuke.

"Amazing! That's like professional!" cried Ranyi.

"Not bad work," Diko agreed.

Arlie and Dory clapped their hands in glee, Miss Ril was impressed, and Rappy chittered loudly. Calkoro stuck her face in between the students, looking down at the boxed lunch, impressed. This may have been the first time Adelheid had seen the teacher being actually, sincerely impressed toward a student.

Indeed, it was well-made. Sally, scratching her head like she was shy, seemed somehow proud. With her chopsticks, she ate Pearl and Onyx—and then Ranyi cried out in shock again. From underneath Pearl and Onyx appeared more Cutie Healers. This time it was Vega and Altair.

"So Galaxy next, or what?" Mephis asked.

"What about…Dark Cutie?" Kumi-Kumi wondered.

“Man, this must have taken time,” Adelheid said.

The *Cutie Healer* character lunch box with double-level illustrations got the audience all in a tizzy. *It’s gonna be hard to beat that,* Adelheid thought, but she immediately shook her head. This was about whether she would win or lose among her own group. There was no need to pay attention to Sally. Mephis was probably thinking something similar, as she turned around with a serious look on her face. Adelheid followed her, the members of Group Two returning to their original spot.

“Okay, then I’ll start,” said Mephis.

Her lunch was divided into three levels: One was fruit, one was sides, with mainly meatballs, and one was packed with white rice with *furikake* on top.

“…Ain’t that normal?” said Adelheid.

“Naw. This ain’t normal. It’s the real shit. I cooked it with these two crazy huge giant axes. It was wild. The hell was that even, some circus act?”

“I…don’t know…what you mean…,” said Kumi-Kumi.

“Even if the way ya cooked it ain’t normal, if yer servin’ it as a boxed lunch, the one eatin’ it ain’t gonna know.”

“The hell, all you guys whining about it. Then what’d you bring, Adelheid?”

Adelheid pulled out a magic bottle filled with hot water and a cup of instant ramen.

Mephis pounded her right fist against the picnic sheet. It made a weak smacking sound. “Bullshit, Adelheid! You complain about my lunch, and you brought cup noodles?!”

“That ain’t what this is! This is the Twin Dragon’s Original Brand Super-Delicious stuff!”

“Flaking out and going for a joke lunch like that is so fucking unfunny! Your joke bombed, man!”

“Don’t ya call this a joke that bombed! Ah’m takin’ this seriously!”

Adelheid had gone searching to find who was a great cook among the Archfiend Cram School graduates, and as a result, she had come to a single magical girl. Even as others gave her the cold shoulder—she put people off with her over-enthusiasm—she continued to have a widely acknowledged passion for eating.

So there was no doubting her there—but her specialty was ramen. For bringing in ramen as lunch, instant was the best way.

Her senior, the skilled cook, had offered from the kindness of her heart, “How about I put out a stall?” Of course, Adelheid had refused. And so Adelheid had shouldered this hardship so that she could refuse without causing offense. She didn’t want to believe it was for nothing.

“So then Adelheid is provisional last place,” said Mephis.

“Don’t ya go assumin’! At least make the judgment after ya eat it!”

“I feel like we’d know even without trying. Oh well, so then what about you, Lillian?”

They looked toward her to see she was cradling her lunch in her arms and bolting down her lunch. Her eyes were glassy.

“Hey, hold on. Why are you already starting to eat?” demanded Mephis.

“What sort of lunch did ya make, Lillian? Show us.”

Lillian flatly shook her head. She wouldn’t even let go of the box. “No. This lunch isn’t for anyone. It’s mine. I have to eat it. For her—for her feelings, I can’t let anyone take it, I can’t!” she declared forcefully, as if her normal timidness were a lie. There were deep circles under her eyes, her long, black, and under-brushed hair was disheveled, her skin was sickly pale, and her eyes were glassy—teary, even. She was just like a character out of a horror movie.

Adelheid quietly averted her eyes and whispered to Mephis, “It seems best not to bother her too much…”

“How did she get like this…?”

“She said she was searchin’ for a recipe online… She probably encountered the darkness of the Internet…”

“Scary… What the hell…?”

“Ah think she’ll be back to the normal Lillian after a few days, so just stay patient until then…”

So finally, Kumi-Kumi, they all thought as they looked over at her to see her fishing through her backpack, pale-faced.

“…What’s wrong?” said Adelheid.

“…I can’t find it. I thought…I made…a lunch…and brought it…but…”

“What? What the hell, at an important time like this?” said Mephis.

“Well, but, I know I brought it…or, I think I did…maybe…it was a dream…”

"C'mon, makin' lunch in yer dreams isn't gonna do ya any good."

Mephis and Adelheid helped her, and they turned her backpack upside down and took everything out, but there was no boxed lunch. Kumi-Kumi's shoulders drooped as she sighed in sorrow. Adelheid was about to say something to her, but noticing the shadow falling over her, she lifted her head.

Lightning was staring down at Group Two's kerfuffle. She was holding the rice ball, now about two-thirds smaller, mouth munching along. She was wearing a large hat with a wide brim, a so-called actress hat—though it was normally a hat for rather older women, it suited her so well, you wouldn't think she was a middle schooler. The uniform she normally wore actually stood out more.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Aw, it's nothing much," said Mephis. "And hey, why're you over here?"

"That doesn't matter. More importantly, you forgot your lunch, didn't you? How awful!"

This may have been the first time she had ever heard Lightning cry out loud—it made the other students react as well, and they all came gathering round. Miss Ril consoled Kumi-Kumi, and Tetty took the lead to propose that they gather some side dishes, a bit from everyone, and by everyone offering their small amount, a heaping stack of sides was piled in front of Kumi-Kumi. The biggest of these was one-quarter of Lightning's rice ball—and looking at her, she seemed as glad as if it were herself, saying with a smile, "It's tough, not having lunch."

◇ Ranyi

Everyone sat in the same seats on the way back as they had there—in other words, Lightning sat beside Ranyi. She seemed horribly exhausted. As soon as she sat down in her seat, she blew a deep sigh, stroking her long eyelashes with elegant gestures. Her exhaustion didn't mar her beauty. But she seemed like she would fall asleep at any moment.

There was something Ranyi wanted to ask before she fell asleep. Ranyi asked quietly, "Kumi-Kumi forgot her lunch, huh?"

"Yes, so I heard." The tone of Lightning's voice was strongly emphasizing that she wanted to sleep more than talk.

But Ranyi continued, "Lightning, you gave her about a quarter of your rice ball, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did."

"You don't think you gave her too much? You're tired now because you're hungry, aren't you?"

Lightning was a glutton. During the field trip, she had been devouring that giant rice ball, and if extras came up during lunch, then she would raise her hand, no matter what it was. She wasn't kind or considerate enough to think about restraining her appetite just because a classmate was in trouble. Her obsession with eating was to be feared.

And that was the person who had offered one-fourth of her rice ball. The recipient, Kumi-Kumi, seemed to have gotten more than she could handle, too. There was just too much. Even though the concept of putting together a lunch had been to get a little from everyone to put together one person's worth, Lightning alone had offered her more than a full serving.

It wasn't like she'd had no appetite. She still seemed sleepy, and even on the bus there, she had been muttering in her sleep as she napped. Saying, "I can't…get the dream lunch out of the dream…oh no…" It had seemed like she was worrying about her lunch even in her dreams, so Ranyi remembered it well.

Being someone like that, there was no way Lightning would share one-quarter of her rice ball.

"Why so much…?"

Lightning waved her right hand languidly. Her eyes were already closed.

There was no response. Lightning had fallen into the world of sleep.

◇ Nemurin

The magical girls sat all around a circular table, beginning the day's review session.

"Okay, so then this will be the review meeting," said Nemurin. "Pretty Miss Mary, do you have something?"

"I think it was bad to forget the major premise that things in a dream can't be taken out of the dream."

"True, true. Well then, Ideal Sister Nana?"

"It was sad what happened, but I think it was good that we were able to work things out."

"Mm-hmm. It felt like destiny that one of Kumi-Kumi's classmates was napping. Thanks to that, we were able to tell her in a dream that 'Kumi-Kumi forgot her lunch, so help her out!' And you could feel the power of friendship in solving it by gathering side dishes."

"Yes, it was a beautiful friendship," said Ideal Nana.

"Well then, next, Ideal Winterprison."

"About that classmate…is this quite all right?"

Nemurin, Mary, and Sister Nana all looked over at the girl sitting beside Winterprison. She was a human girl with a face so perfect, it was like she was a magical girl. Her cheeks, smooth like white porcelain, were puffed up large as she bolted down Kumi-Kumi's dream lunch.

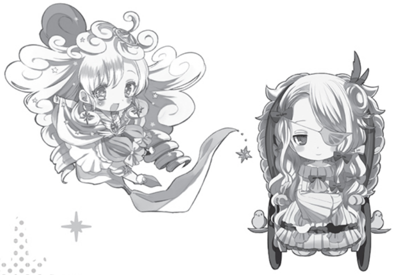
Kumi-Kumi would not necessarily be able to come to this world again. So the odds were high that this lunch would go to waste. But then how had this classmate managed to come here like she'd been aiming for it anyway? Had she aimed for it? Wasn't it too good to be a coincidence? Seeing how she was eating Kumi-Kumi's lunch like it was obvious she should, Nemurin could only assume that she'd meant to do it from the start.

Nemurin shook her head, along with her antennae, Mary shook her head, and Sister Nana gave a spellbound smile to see Winterprison and the mysterious pretty girl side by side.

The girl noticed that she was being watched and tried to say something, but since her mouth was full of food, she couldn't talk. After making a gesture like she was using a pottery wheel, she stuck up her right thumb and thrust it forward, then went for the lunch again.

Queens Preflop

This story takes place before the events of *Magical Girl Raising Project JOKERS*.



Debut

This is a new story written for this book.

Queens Preflop

◇ Puk Puck

It was at a gathering of the Three Sages that Puk Puck learned about the Very Delicious Chocolate Fair that was being held in the underground of a certain department store in K Prefecture.

Grim Heart was shrieking something incomprehensible, and as Puk was responding with some careless remarks like “Oh really,” “Huh,” “Mm-hmm,” just as usual, it gradually came across what Grim Heart was trying to say. She was probably insisting that the various snacks prepared for this tea party were quite wonderful.

And the multicolored chocolates she had brought in were all actually very delicious. When Puk asked where she had purchased them, all she got back were those shrieks, but seeing the piece of paper Grim Heart was waving around, the wise Puk Puck was able to figure it out. Printed on that piece of paper was “Very Delicious Chocolate Fair” in a cute font. In other words, it was a pamphlet.

She doubted that Grim Heart had gone to the fair herself. She had wrangled something that Lethe had bought, or ordered a subordinate to go buy something for her, one of the two. Since unlike Grim Heart, Puk didn’t mind going outside, if she was going to buy something, she would check it out with her own eyes and tongue.

Puk was unusually picky when it came to her clothes, food, and living space. She had to go to this chocolate fair.

Returning to her estate from the Magical Kingdom, she immediately took action. From her closet, which was as layered as a mille-feuille, she would pull out her favorite dresses and togas, and after swiftly deciding on her best costume, she’d leave her “estate, which was both everywhere and nowhere.” Then, using a gate and other public transportation facilities, she would go to the chocolate fair to buy a lot of sweets.

In her heart, she had already raced out to the event venue, but unfortunately, things didn't go so smoothly. Waiting in front of her closet room was a very sinister old lady wearing an unsophisticated hooded robe—her grand chamberlain—forcing her to come to a stop.

"I've heard," said the grand chamberlain.

"Heard what?" Puk replied.

The grand chamberlain put a hand to her mouth and coughed for a while.

"If you're not feeling well, you can't push yourself, 'kay?"

"This is just a complaint of an elder with not much more time left."

The slender old mage clung to her cane to stand. If someone more ignorant were to see, they would be entirely convinced by her remark that she didn't have long. But Puk Puck knew that her grand chamberlain had been calling herself an "elder with not much more time left" for the past fifty years.

"Puk thinks you have got some time left, though."

"Whether I do or not, please listen. You're going to a World Sweets Exhibit, aren't you?"

"It's a Very Delicious Chocolate Fair."

"I don't know if it was the Osks or the Caspars or what, but good grief, they didn't need to tell you such a thing. Your going out presents so many harms, Mistress Puk, and not one whit of benefit. You would obviously go the moment you heard there was some program with sweets or whatnot, so they should have used their sense and kept quiet."

She didn't speak in the most polite way, but she was the first disciple of Av Lapati Puk Baltha, and nobody in this estate could tell off this old nitpicker who had served for so many years—Puk herself included.

"They told me to be nice, so Puk feels bad for you to say that."

"Regardless, I am against it."

"Puk wants to go."

The grand chamberlain most likely was about to argue, but couldn't manage it, and coughed painfully. Puk circled behind her and kindly rubbed her back as she considered coolly. Whether she was not long for this world or not, this was certainly harming her health. If she escorted the old woman to her room now and laid her down, and then went out while she was asleep, Puk could go drown in an ocean of chocolate.

The grand chamberlain pushed aside Puk's hand and glared at her. "You were just thinking something bad, weren't you?"

"You think? Puk doesn't think so."

"You're always like that. When you get an idea, you push it through. You misuse your magic. You'll question whether people like or dislike you, but not whether something is right or wrong. If there wasn't anyone to stop you, you would get so out of control."

"Will this be a long lecture?"

"Just those three sisters who are your favorites are still not enough, Mistress Puk. They must gain more experience, or there's no way they'll be able to stop you from doing whatever you please. You won't even need your magic. You have the history of a great Sage, and the charisma that comes from it—they won't be able to oppose that."

Puk consciously made not to use her magic on the grand chamberlain. It was because the grand chamberlain knew that that she would say as she pleased. Her charisma or whatever she said never worked then.

"I must live just a little longer, and train those three…"

"Puk is busy, though."

"A retainer who can offer admonition is truly needed in any time and place, in any country, for any ruler."

The grand chamberlain coughed again, and with a *hup*, Puk lifted her into her arms. She felt like she'd gotten quite a lot lighter, compared to the last time she'd carried her. She started walking toward the grand chamberlain's room. "You've got to take it easy and rest."

"Mistress Puk."

"Yes, yes."

"Though I am opposed to it, I will not say not to go."

While walking, Puk tilted her head. "Really?"

"If I were to oppose it so foolishly, you would choose either to sneak out, or to simply do it regardless. Don't you tell me you don't know how much you've made me cry. And every time, I'm hard-pressed just cleaning things up afterward… So I won't oppose it. However! I will make you accept some conditions. If you go out like that, Mistress Puk, then your magic's influence will leak out even if you restrain it, and the new friends you make will cause a great confusion in the outside world. And if either the Osk Faction or the

Caspar Faction take advantage of the confusion, that would bring about some awful things indeed."

"Puk doesn't want that."

"But we also couldn't really clear people out for this—that would be stealing a chance for amusement from the people. That is why this comes with conditions. Please go out in a costume that will not cause confusion. If you're going to be going outside, then your appearance, language, name, and magic must not be that of Puk Puck."

◇ Uluru

To the right, there was chocolate. To the left, more chocolate.

"Wow! Chocolate Uluru thinks she's heard of, chocolate Uluru's probably seen before, chocolate with a complicated name, chocolate with a name Uluru can't read—there's so much stuff!"

"Sis, you're so excited, your vocabulary's going downhill."

"That one looks so good! And that, too! Don't you think so, too, Lady Puk…huh?"

Uluru turned around. Sorami, carrying candy, had an exasperated look on her face, and Sachiko, who was carrying ice cream, looked like she would burst into tears at any moment. Uluru looked back, front, right, and left, and up at the ceiling while she was at it, but Puk Puck, who was supposed to have been there, was gone. Remembering that *Oh yeah, she was looking different from usual,* she tried looking around once more, but she was still gone.

"Hey, Sorami," said Uluru. "Where did Lady Puk go?"

"She yelled like a bandit who's just found a caravan and flew off," said Sorami.

"Why didn't you stop her?"

"There's no way I could. And besides, she always does this."

"Where is she now?"

"Well, I couldn't really say. There's so many people going in and out here, and it's basically never a closed space, so my magic doesn't work well. Plus, I've been calling Lady Puk's phone for a while, but she's ignoring me."

"That doesn't sound good."

"Like I said, it's always like this."

"Hey, hey…what do I do?" Sachiko asked. "I got handed this ice cream to hold for a bit, but do you think I can eat it? At this rate, it's going to melt and get all sticky…ahh, it's dripping."

"Aaall right, the Lady Puk search brigade is here! Everyone follow Uluru!"

◇ Shadow Gale

Tarts. Fondue. Mousse. Cookies. Crepes. Scones. Brownies. Eclairs. Buche de Noel. Bonbons. Sacher torte. Opera cake. Mohrenkopf.

No matter where or by what means you went in the department store underground, it was all chocolate, and you couldn't get away from it. In the first place, anyone who wanted to escape wouldn't be here, and wouldn't come. From casual snacks to famous brands, Pfle and Shadow Gale enjoyed chocolate to their hearts' content.

That day, Shadow Gale was not a black nurse, and Pfle was also not using her wheelchair—she was walking on her own feet. To mingle with the crowds, they wore ordinary clothes. "Magical girls have a sharper sense of taste than humans. And they can keep eating chocolate without worrying about the calorie intake. That's why we should transform" was Pfle's suggestion; Shadow Gale had wondered, "Wouldn't this be transforming for self-interest?" making her hesitate for a total of two seconds.

Though their clothes looked ordinary, Shadow Gale's knit shirt and loose-fitting pants were both strong enough to withstand a magical girl's movement and easy to move in—in other words, they were specially made, so getting chocolate on them was out of the question. And so with a mastery of both caution and boldness, they were walking while eating. The two of them went to buy food and then to the eating area over and over, and then once both of them would have bled out the nose if they put any more in had they not been magical girls, they finally stopped eating.

From here on out, they were going to split up. Pfle would take it easy waiting in the eating area. Shadow Gale, who was being worked like a dog, would go to buy souvenirs, with a notepad in one hand. Slipping through the crowds with the speed of a magical girl, she briskly continued her shopping, and then happened to turn back.

A girl was watching Shadow Gale. Her apparent age was in the single digits, her glossy black hair flowed like water down to her lower back, to be tied at the end with a red ribbon. She wore a T-shirt with English—no, some foreign language on it—a parka, shorts, colorful socks, and famous kids' sneakers that sold themselves on being able to run fast in them. Her eyes were sparkling with curiosity, gazing in her direction.

Someone who didn't know would just see a pretty girl, but someone in the same profession could tell. That was a magical girl. She had taken off her costume and changed into ordinary clothes so she could keep her magical girl physical abilities and magic.

In other words, she was the same as Shadow Gale that day.

What should she do? Shadow Gale couldn't make a decision in this situation. Thinking, *but Pfle would,* she turned her face to where she should be, but that magical girl must have anticipated that, as she was smiling at her from point-blank range.

Shadow Gale swallowed a shriek and cleared her throat to cover it. "Umm…what do you need?"

"—I mean…I'm kind of in trouble. Could you help me out?" She tilted her head cutely. "My name is Pu…Chocolat Granité. I got separated from my friends."

"Uh-huh. Oh no, that's not good."

The lost child station rose in Shadow Gale's mind, but she figured that bringing over a magical girl would be a problem, and after worrying about it, she said, "Then come this way" and pulled her hand. She would keep trying to wander off every time she saw something unusual, so Shadow Gale pulled her hand hard, but the little girl was stronger, and so left without a choice, Shadow Gale took off her watch. Thinking that this sort of thing might happen, she was wearing a number of mechanical objects she could use up. But she still felt a bit regretful as she did her modifications with the wristwatch as material and made a robot. It wasn't a design for girls, but it looked pretty good for something made so quickly.

"Wow, amazing!" cried the little girl.

"Amazing, isn't it, isn't it? Look, it can transform again and again."

"Wow! Wow! Your fingers just keep whirling around, they're amazing!"

"Huh? That's what impresses you?"

"They're pretty and cool and cute fingers."

"Ah, oh. Thanks."

She somehow covered her shock as she proceeded along. And then at her goal point, in the corner of the eating area, there was a magical girl having a tea party on her own. Pfle was sitting there, smiling faintly, a paper cup placed on the table. The sleeve button of her white bow tie blouse touched the table and made a clicking sound. Since it was forbidden to bring in outside food, she was not drinking the Hitokouji special ridiculously expensive black tea, but the black tea she had bought at a shop here. She followed the rules, when it could be seen.

"You took quite a while," said Pfle.

"There were so many souvenirs."

Placing the two armfuls' worth of bags on the table, Shadow Gale wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. She was trying to emphasize how much work she was doing, but Pfle showed no appreciation for Shadow Gale's toils, shrugging her shoulders. "It was my intent to enjoy tea with you, though."

"What a strange thing for you to say! If you had helped, then the time spent going shopping would have been cut in half. Why am I doing everything…? Miss, you don't think much of common courtesy, do you?"

Pfle picked up a scone with plenty of chocolate sauce drizzled over it and bit into it elegantly. The gesture itself should have been, if anything, crude, but for some reason, it looked classy.

"I wouldn't say I don't think much of it. I'm leaving it to you because you work so briskly for me."

"It all depends on how you look at it…"

"By the way, whoever is this?"

The magical girl who was standing behind Shadow Gale lifted her right arm cheerily. "Ohhh! I'm Chocolat Granité! I'm a magical girl."

Her voice was high and loud. Shadow Gale didn't really want her saying "magical girl" in a public place. Shadow Gale lowered her voice, saying, "It seems she's lost," to explain her—Chocolat's—situation.

"Have you tried calling for her companions via the store broadcast?" Pfle said, her manner suddenly polite.

Shadow Gale was startled, looking at Pfle. She was looking at Chocolat with a cool and unruffled expression. Unlike Shadow Gale, Pfle was aware of what she was doing when she ignored etiquette. She was not normally so kind as to speak politely to a magical girl she had just met simply because she didn't know her age, and even if she wouldn't say out loud, *Don't get in our way,* she would indicate it with her attitude. And then all the more so if it was with someone who lacked the delicacy to lower their voice when they talked.

"I'd like to avoid attention, if I can," said the little girl.

"Why not try contacting them on your magical phone?"

"It isn't working right." Chocolat placed a magical phone on the table. It must not have been able to turn on, as the screen was black, with no sign it would work.

Shadow Gale gave a little nod. "If that's the issue, I think I can repair it."

Pfle's right eyebrow twitched. The gesture seemed to say something. Since she knew that Pfle would just give her a hard time, Shadow Gale acted before Pfle could say a word. Shadow Gale's magic was to modify mechanical things. Magical phones were fundamentally made to not be modified, but if she set things up right, then it was possible to crack them, and simple repair, she could get done on the spot. It seemed like the girl was normally handling it roughly, and the wiring was a bit off. This wouldn't take any time.

Shadow Gale briskly repaired it, and as an extra, she combined it with the robot she'd made before, then handed it to Chocolat.

"Wow…thanks!" The girl turned on the phone, and the screen was filled with rows of messages. Her companions must have been trying to get a hold of her. It seemed they were worried.

Chocolat stood up and gave a little bow. "Thanks so much! Your magic is so nice."

"Oh, no, it's really nothing much."

The girl waved a hand with a smile and vanished. She must have moved with a magical girl's speed. Even if they were both magical girls, there were some who could move with a speed difficult for someone like Shadow Gale to see. Thinking about how roughly she had used her magical phone, she didn't seem like the type who was very good at controlling her strength. Shadow Gale prayed that she wouldn't bump into something and break it.

Thinking that she'd done something nice, she reached out to a scone. But right before she could touch it, it was snatched away from the side. Pfle bit into the scone she'd stolen. That was unreasonable. This time she was obviously doing it in a crude way.

"What's the matter?" Shadow Gale asked.

"Don't give me that," Pfle replied. "I thought I've told you a thousand times that you should avoid showing your magic as much as possible."

"Well, that's… But um, that reminds me, miss. You were speaking politely, for once."

"Since it was someone you should be polite to."

"A magical girl you've only just met? And from the way she was talking, she's quite a bit younger."

"She must have had her physical abilities adjusted somehow. She seemed like she was struggling terribly to move around. And there must be some perception block spell cast on her, as her appearance seemed a bit off. It's fair to assume that was adjusted, too. Her name clearly seemed like a fake. Her clothing appeared casual, but it was all order-made, top to bottom. When you can tell the skill of the tailor at a glance, that means it's quite the impressive outfit. In other words—that means it's someone important come in secret."

Shadow Gale was impressed that she'd seen all that, but since it would irritate her to admit that, she groaned, "Mgh."

However Pfle interpreted that, she put a hand to her forehead. "Mamori. You just went and showed off your magic, without holding anything back, to someone like that."

"So in other words…can I dream that I might be headhunted by someone important?"

And now at last, Pfle gave an unconcealed sigh.

◇ Puk Puck

Sachiko—her mouth dirtied with whipped cream—clung to her with tears in her eyes, Uluru's ears were laid flat with a look of sincere relief, and Sorami had circled behind the other two to pat their shoulders. All three of them were cute in their own ways, but if Puk was going to make a request of any of them, then she figured that it would be Sorami, the calmest of them. Maybe Puk should ask her to go search for the magical girl who had saved her.

Puk's principle was to prioritize cuteness. The way that girl's fingers had moved had been cute. The workings of her magic had also been cute, and their precise movements had been cute and scored high. Incidentally, the robot had been cute in an unrefined way. She wanted to make friends with her. And the other who'd been with her—well, her looks had been cute.

Puk Puck folded her arms, tilted her head, and considered. But she couldn't ignore the chocolate. Rather than forcing the three sisters to do the unreasonable, she'd poke into the identity of those two later by throwing people at the problem. If someone somewhere knew, then she would be able to thank them, and she could make friends with them.

Right now, she should put everything into buying chocolate.

"All right, then, let's split up here and go around the different counters," said Puk.

"Huh…? But we were just finally able to meet up," said Sachiko.

"We can't leave you all alone," said Uluru.

"This isn't a closed space, so my magic doesn't work very well," said Sorami.

"It'll be okay. I got this properly fixed." Puk held up her magical phone to show.

It made a clear whirring sound and instantly transformed, and now in a human shape, the magical phone opened up to show them the screen. Sachiko clapped her hands and went *Wow!* Uluru's eyes widened in shock, and Sorami narrowed her eyes in suspicion. Her suspicion was no surprise. It hadn't had a function like this until just now.

Hmm, I might have met someone really amazing.

With some future fun saved for later, Puk Puck hurried to the sales floor. They said that chocolate was originally used as a medicine, so if she made some delicious chocolate as a souvenir, then surely her grand chamberlain would regain her health.

Afterword

This is Asari Endou in the short story collection. The further I progress in the main story, the more characters there are, and I get just that many more options for magical girls to appear in the short stories. Right after this short story collection is published, it will be the tenth anniversary of *Magical Girl Raising Project*. Of course, that'll give you more options. It's something to be thankful for.

And then very soon, the continuation of the main series, *Red* will be coming out. It should be coming out. I don't think I'll be making you wait too long. This time for sure it's not a lie. Following *Black* and *White*, it's the end of the magical-girl class arc, as well as the conclusion of Snow White's story. I hope you will read it, too.

And now for some notes.

About Sister Nana and Winterprison, who appeared with increased mass as a dream resident in the short story, and was unchanged in appearance, respectively—they originally appeared in a short story that was a purchase bonus for the original drama CD *Magical Girl Raising Project in Dreamland* that went on sale at Tora no Ana. "Ideal Winterprison" is the embodiment of Sister Nana's ideal, and so she has a bit of a different character background and is more fantastical, while "Ideal Sister Nana" is the embodiment of Winterprison's ideal, and is thus a little heavier and wider in the horizontal direction.

Since I realized after publishing this that these are rather niche characters, I'm supplementing that here. They are good magical girls, so those who have just discovered them, I hope you like them.

One more thing—in the short stories that are from the anime DVDs, the seasons follow the anime. That's because there are some slight differences in what time of year it seems to be, between the main story and the anime. Well, the sense of seasons in this series was hazy to begin with, so I think it's not too much of a problem.

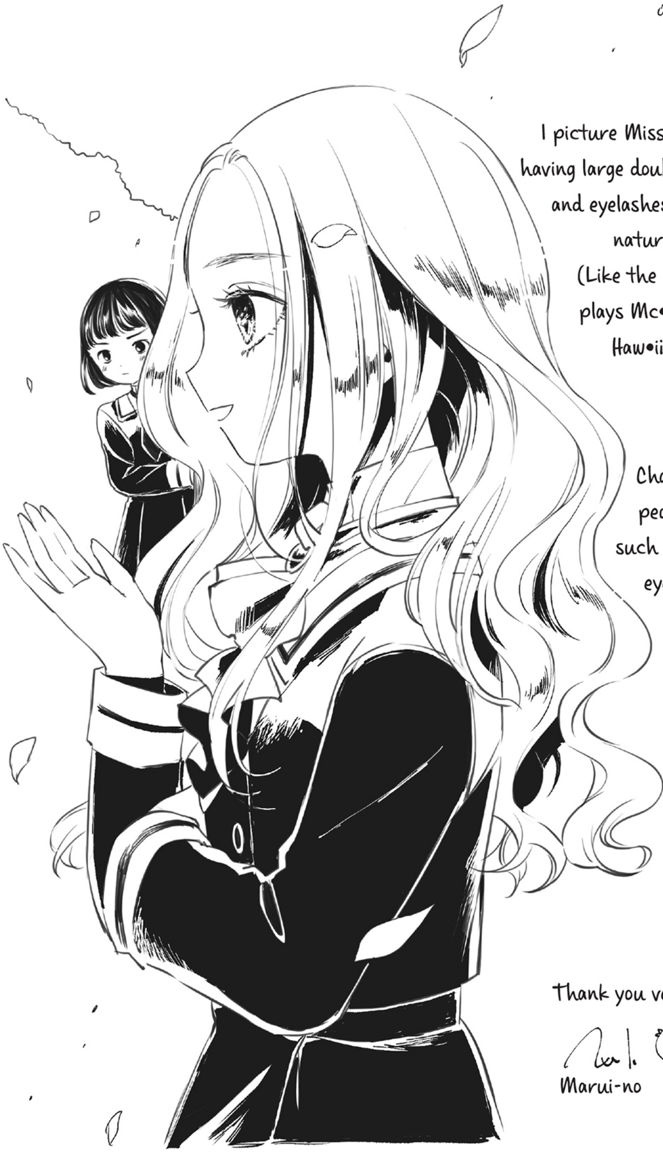
I’m sorry, please have mercy on me.

To everyone from the editorial department who has guided me, and to the economic buff S-mura, who has taught me many things about tax returns: Thank you very much.

Marui-no, thank you very much for your wonderful illustrations. Thanks to you, Hamuel’s exploits as a trainer have gained even more depth. And Kinunomiya actually got visuals! When that happened, it made me ooh, like “I see, so this is Kinunomiya.”

And to all my readers, thank you very much. The supportive messages in your fan letters really encourage me. And aside from that, your impressions, fan art, and wonderful gifts, and everything else—every single one has become my strength.

Well then, let us meet in *Red*.



I picture Miss Kanoe as
having large double eyelids
and eyelashes that are
naturally curly.
(Like the actor who
plays Mc•arrett on
Haw•ii Five-0...)

Charismatic
people have
such fluttery
eyelashes...

Thank you very much!

Marui-no

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